

# From “Red Rising” to “One Goal”

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## *A Case Study of the Chicago Blackhawks’ Organizational Resurgence from 2007-2009*

In the early 2000’s, the Chicago Blackhawks had practically disappeared from the professional sports scene in Chicago. Ranked 29th out of 30 teams in the NHL in attendance, racking up \$191 million dollars in losses, and blacked out from television, the Blackhawks were in desperate need of an entire organizational revolution. The team’s unique and dire situation was brought on by damaging human resource practices, a misguided fan philosophy, and a culture that valued making excuses and making money over winning a championship. Fans’ trust in the organization was at an all-time low. But, in 2007, a change in ownership led to a sweeping transformation in the organizational culture, bringing the fan’s needs back to the forefront. It was not one factor, but rather, the integrated cohesion of multiple actions, decisions, and initiatives focused around a central mission that led to the Blackhawks’ revolution. The franchise understood their position and their fans and created an organizational structure that supported each of these changes and new philosophies, transforming the Blackhawks from the second city’s fifth team into one of the most beloved sports franchises in Chicago.

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction .....   | 1   |
| Methods.....   | 2   |
| Situation prior to 2007 .....  | 4   |
| Undervaluation and Underutilization of Human Resources.....              | 7   |
| Poor Upper-Level Management and Hockey Operations Hiring Decisions ..... | 8   |
| Misguided fan philosophy.....  | 12  |
| Lack of Success and a Lack of a Winning Philosophy .....                 | 18  |
| Team Performance.....  | 18  |
| Lack of a Winning Philosophy .....                                       | 22  |
| Outspoken and Stubborn on Controversial Matters .....                    | 27  |
| Issues in the NHL.....   | 32  |
| The Resurgence.....  | 37  |
| Personnel Changes.....   | 39  |
| Organizational Philosophy Changes.....                                   | 43  |
| Televising Games .....   | 50  |
| Changes to the Team .....  | 59  |
| Marketing Revolution .....   | 63  |
| 365 Day Marketing Strategy .....   | 66  |
| Creating an Atmosphere of Accessibility .....                            | 76  |
| Understanding the Fans.....  | 85  |
| Respect for Tradition .....  | 89  |
| The Winter Classic.....  | 96  |
| Online Presence and New Media Trailblazing .....                         | 100 |
| Website and Social Media Strategy .....                                  | 100 |
| Blackhawks TV.....   | 108 |
| Discussion.....  | 117 |
| Conclusion.....  | 129 |
| Exhibits.....  | 149 |

## Introduction

In 2004, ESPN named the Chicago Blackhawks the worst franchise in all of professional sports. Once revered as a timeless Original Six team, with fans that literally shook the rafters of Chicago Stadium with their cheers, the Blackhawks were relegated to the Second City's fifth team. With out-of-touch ownership, outdated organizational philosophies, and a brand and marketing strategy greatly in need of reinvention, the Blackhawks struggled through the lockout and the following season, recording near NHL-lows in attendance and TV ratings. Yet, in 2007, a change in personnel sparked a transition that would soon revamp the entire organization and bring the Blackhawks back to prominence in Chicago.

This thesis takes the form of a case study, and has three parts. The first examines the desperate situation that the Blackhawks were in throughout the early 2000's until mid-2007, providing context for the sweeping changes, and also exploring why certain strategic decisions turned out to detriment the organization. The second part focuses on the drastic strategic changes made during the transitional period from 2007 to 2009, when Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough took over the Blackhawks front office. These changes sparked more than a marketing revolution – it was an entire organizational reinvention that encompassed and involved every department. The analysis will endeavor to show how it is not one dominating factor, but rather, the integration of many smaller decisions that enable an organization to succeed. The third section will attempt to cohesively discuss and extend the effects of these individual changes on the entirety of the Blackhawks organization, and examine how the integration of fan-centered decisions has helped the Blackhawks to achieve and sustain high levels of fan satisfaction and engagement.

While this thesis is a case study – and therefore specific to a particular team under a unique set of circumstances, it could indicate areas for other struggling sport franchises to consider refurbishing. However, in examining the interplay and timing of each factor, it will also show the subjectivity that keeps sport marketing from morphing into true science. By examining each factor that went into the Chicago Blackhawks’ organizational and marketing resurgence, this thesis will bring better understanding of the critical importance of organizational and business strategy in turning around struggling franchises.

## **Methods**

Taking the form of an extensive case study, this thesis was developed utilizing several research methods to gather and analyze information. Research began in the summer of 2012 and extended into the fall of 2013.

In-person interviews were a primary form of research for this study. Over the summer of 2012, I visited the United Center and conducted several interviews with Blackhawks employees from a diverse range of departments. These interviews were scheduled and facilitated with the assistance of Human Resources Coordinator, Kyleen King. During my visit, I was able to interview representatives from the following departments: Ticket Sales and Service, Finance and Accounting, Marketing, Corporate Sponsorship, and Community Relations. The information gathered at this point served to help guide the direction of subsequent research, particularly in the analysis of relevant articles and press releases. Also in the summer of 2012, I was able to attend the Blackhawks Convention to conduct formal observations. My recordings were focused on the layout and the various offerings of the event. This process facilitated analysis of the Convention and its integration with the rest of the Blackhawks’ marketing strategy. Additionally, I was able to conduct informal interviews with Blackhawks personnel on site at the Convention. These

conversations were the basis for searching for additional research on topics like season ticket sales and community outreach programs.

This study also utilized the analysis of primary sources such as newspaper articles and press releases from the years prior to and during the Blackhawks transformation. Specifically, newspaper analysis encompassed articles written between 2003 and 2009. Articles were obtained via subscriptions from The Ohio State University libraries and The Chicago Public Library. A large concentration of the analysis focused on articles from the Chicago Tribune, as it is the most circulated newspaper in Chicago. The official Blackhawks press releases were obtained from [blackhawks.nhl.com](http://blackhawks.nhl.com) and covered the years 2005-2013. Finally, articles covering and summarizing the Blackhawks' resurgence from different news sites like Forbes and Sports Business Journal were also consulted, providing a concise outline of some of the major decisions and transformations. Investigation of individual Chicago Tribune articles or Blackhawks press releases served to fill in the gaps and provide details to aid in analysis of the situation and the changes that the organization went through.

Further interviews were also conducted as news articles and press releases began to form the story of the Blackhawks' comeback. In the summer and fall of 2013, additional Blackhawks employees were interviewed by phone. These interviews included follow-ups from previous conversations, but were primarily focused on reaching departments not previously interviewed, such as the New Media and Youth Hockey departments. Team Historian and former Chicago Tribune writer, Bob Verdi, was also interviewed, providing the perspective of both a journalist and an employee of the Blackhawks. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with members of the media that covered the Blackhawks – Chris Kuc of the Chicago Tribune and Phil Bedella of Comcast SportsNet. These interviews provided an outside perspective of the Blackhawks from

organizations still very much involved with the team. Once again, the information gained from these interviews was used to construct a timeline of the myriad of factors – both large and small – that contributed to the fall and rise of the Chicago Blackhawks.

Finally, informal personal experience with the Blackhawks contributed to the design and analysis of this case study. As a fan of the Chicago Blackhawks since 2006, I am deeply familiar with many aspects of the franchise. For example, I have personal experience listening to radio and television broadcasts, attending games and fan events, and visiting the Blackhawks website and social media pages. These personal experiences have aided me in understanding the team, and give me a unique viewpoint from which to research and write. Though watching through the lens of a fan, I witnessed the Chicago Blackhawks' transformation in person – as new players were drafted, as games were aired on television, and as new marketing efforts were undertaken. With that said, I have taken great care to only allow insights from interviews and newspaper articles, as well as formally conducted observations to be used as research for this study. Utilizing these research methods, I was able to construct a comprehensive outline of the myriad of internal and external forces that contributed to the Blackhawks' organizational reinvention.

### **Situation prior to 2007**

Founded in 1926 by Major Frederic McLaughlin, the Chicago Blackhawks are one of the NHL's "Original Six" franchises. Originally called the Black Hawks – named for the 333<sup>rd</sup> Machine Gun Battalion of the 86<sup>th</sup> Division of the U.S. Army that fought in World War I – the team won the first game they ever played, 4-1 over the Toronto St. Pat's ("The McLaughlin Years"). Three years later, the Blackhawks moved to Chicago Stadium in 1929, and won two Stanley Cups within their first decade in their new facility (1934 and 1938) ("The McLaughlin Years"). While the next two decades were much less friendly to the Hawks in terms of

championships, the team still enjoyed some “highlights” in the form of memorable players. This was the era of the “Pony Line” – centered by Hart Trophy winner Max Bentley, who was flanked by his brother, Doug Bentley, and Lady Byng Trophy winner Bill Mosienko – an exciting group of players to watch, despite the team’s record (“From the Cellar”). However, in the 1960-61 season, that record improved immensely; in fact, “the Hawks set club records for wins (29) and points (75)” and ended up winning the Stanley Cup once again (“From the Cellar”). The players on the 1961 Cup-winning team were legends in the making, including Bobby Hull, Stan Mikita, Pierre Pilote, and Glen Hall, and it seemed that the 1961 Cup win lit fire under the Hawks. They sold out every game at Chicago Stadium for the next 14 years, as fans were treated to spectacular performances by Hull and Mikita, along with other greats like Jim Pappin, Pit Martin, Dennis Hull, and Phil Esposito, yet they did not win any more championships (“From the Cellar”). Nonetheless, passion for the Blackhawks increased and the atmosphere at Chicago Stadium was intense, the building literally shaking due to excitement during crucial moments.

In 1972, Bobby Hull left the Blackhawks to join the WHA Winnipeg Jets, a move that slowly started to hurt the team. Though the team suffered throughout the 1970’s, in the 1980’s things started to pick back up – if not reflected in the record, at least in the caliber of players on the ice. Denis Savard, Al Secord, Darryl Sutter, and Doug Wilson were some of the new names that were re-energizing the Blackhawks and their fans – fans that were still showing up in droves even without a winning record (“Defensive 70’s”). According to the Blackhawks, it was during the 1980’s that the Stadium “became louder and crazier than ever” and the “frenzy in the old barn during the singing of the National Anthem became legendary” (“Defensive 70’s”). Chicago fans became known by the players for their passion and their volume, and they took pride in it. However, through the 1980’s and into the 1990’s, the Hawks had very little team success. There



were still fan favorites like Chris Chelios and Jeremy Roenick to excite the fans, but postseason play was becoming almost non-existent (“Defensive 70’s”). By the turn of the century, the Blackhawks were a far cry from the spectacular team in 1961, just as the game atmosphere was a far cry from the stadium-shaking support that the fans were known for in the 1980’s.

For an organization with such a long and storied history, it is hard to imagine that in 2004, when the NHL entered its third lockout, the city of Chicago did not seem to notice that its resident NHL team was no longer in season. History was not dead in Chicago, but it was painful – and with the way the fans felt they were treated by team ownership, the Blackhawks might as well have been dead. The stands certainly were. The 2003-2004 season saw the Blackhawks only averaging 13,253 fans in attendance, 65% of the United Center’s capacity, and ranking them second to last in the NHL (“NHL Attendance Report”). Current Blackhawks Historian and former Chicago Tribune writer, Bob Verdi, noted after the 2004 season: “crowds for several games this past winter suspiciously resembled focus groups” (Verdi, “Change Perception?”). Attendance woes were only the most visible of the Blackhawks organization’s problems. The root of the cause ran much deeper.

The problems originated in the inner workings of the Blackhawks organization as a business. The Blackhawks were owned by Wirtz Corporation, “a family-owned business with interests in liquor, wine, and beer distribution, insurance, real estate, banking, and co-ownership of the United Center” (“About Wirtz Corp”). Headed by Chairman and Team President William Wirtz, the Blackhawks had incurred over \$191 million in losses over the past 10 years (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). The Blackhawks were a “wasting asset” – their value kept afloat by Wirtz Corporation’s other businesses, as well as the Wirtz’s co-ownership in the United Center (Forbes valuation 2003). Embroiled in internal disagreements, unable to put a consistent product



on the ice, and out of touch with fans, the Blackhawks franchise was in need of major improvements in their organizational philosophy and business practices. The following sections will outline the problems that existed for the Blackhawks in the early 2000's.

### **Undervaluation and Underutilization of Human Resources**

The success of an organization is partially constrained by the abilities and attitudes of its employees. In 2001, the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies found that “high involvement” human resources systems (that invest in their employees), dramatically increase employee satisfaction and business growth (“HR and the Bottom Line”). When employees feel that their work contributes significant value to their company's success, they want to come to work, and they want to excel.

In the early 2000's, the Chicago Blackhawks were a team struggling to succeed not only on the ice, but also in the front office. To begin with, after the 2004-2005 lockout they were understaffed - they had “laid off nearly half of their employees” by February 2005 (Sassone). Not only did this send a negative message to employees, but it also put them behind on human capital once the NHL resumed play. Before the start of the 2007 season, the Blackhawks were hardly equipped with the human resources to run a successful business – out of 20 total employees, only 12 worked at the United Center, and there was not even a full-time person in charge of the organization's business operations (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). The Blackhawks were essentially trying to run a business with little emphasis on actually conducting business.

Even when positions and departments existed for certain key business roles, it was difficult to see evidence of their role. ESPN.com's Rob Parent noted that while positions such as “Executive Director of Marketing and New Business Development” and “Director of Fan

Development” were listed in the front office, the Blackhawks had yet to “start showing up on the entertainment landscape [in Chicago]” (qtd. in “Franchise Notes”). In fact, it seems incongruous that the Blackhawks had positions devoted to marketing their team, yet their marketing efforts were largely unnoticed, if they existed at all. Bob Verdi wrote in 2004 that the “Hawks generally treat marketing as a dirty word” (Verdi, “Change Perception?”), yet the organization still put up the façade that they valued it. Extending this to the marketing professionals that worked for the Blackhawks during this time, one can speculate on how these perceptions may have affected their work. They worked for an organization that largely refused to communicate their value to fans outside of the arena – this is an enormous constraint that certainly would have handicapped any true efforts to formulate an integrated and successful marketing plan. In addition, due to these constraints, their job title and their efforts were being called into question by the media, causing possible discouragement that could further impact their work.

### **Poor Upper-Level Management and Hockey Operations Hiring Decisions**

The individual departments and employees within the Blackhawks organization had little hope of positive change while the upper echelons of the organization were in disarray. Business strategy is set in a top-down framework, and the highly publicized chaos of the Blackhawks’ top front office and hockey operations executives put the organization in an inefficient holding pattern.

The problem began with loyalty – specifically between team owner William Wirtz and Senior Vice President, Bob Pulford. In 2003, Pulford had been with the team for 26 years, acting in numerous roles. Despite the team decline that occurred during his tenure, he was consistently re-selected for such powerful positions as general manager or head coach whenever team

“shakeups” occurred (“Blackhawks Exec”). It seemed when any high level person was ousted, he would be right there to take that position, even if he wasn’t the best candidate for that job.

This was especially evident early in the 2003 season. The previous season had been marked by the constant disagreements between general manager Mike Smith and head coach Brent Sutter. From the beginning, Smith had not wanted Sutter to be the head coach of his team, and it appeared that they no longer were able to work together. The Chicago Tribune reported that Smith told Sutter, in front of his assistant coaches, that “the team had quit on him and no longer liked playing for him” (Foltman, “Smith Not”). Pulford decided that it was clear that one person had to go – backed by Wirtz, he chose Mike Smith. With the general manager slot open, Pulford quickly slid into the role of “interim” general manager – now the 4<sup>th</sup> time Pulford had found himself in a powerful position that is both highly valued and coveted around the league (Foltman, “Smith Not”). However, what stands out in this situation is not that a high ranking executive quickly took the reins of a team owned by one of his closest friends – it is that an admittedly underqualified man was not only handed an extremely important role in an organization, but was also allowed to believe that he might keep this role over other, more qualified candidates.

The Blackhawks had already tried using Pulford as a general manager three prior times – all three times he was replaced with someone they felt was better. This begs the question – why was Pulford handed this role for a fourth time? It is understood that front office changes, especially at such a high level, must be executed quickly – the team needs leadership to continue onward. However, was Pulford truly the best man to take the role? Even if we adopt this idea that Pulford was indeed the best option for the short term, the Blackhawks allowed Pulford to

assume he had enough power to make final staffing decisions for the team, which soon created further negative publicity and chaotic internal relations for the organization.

As previously suggested, it is doubtful that Pulford was the only Blackhawks executive that could have taken on the role of interim general manager. The Tribune reported that Pulford admitted “his knowledge of the league isn’t what it was in his other stints as GM” (Foltman, “Smith Not”). Even more troubling, is Pulford’s apparent dismissal of this: “I don’t know how [much] knowledge you can have with 30 teams in the league” (Foltman, “Smith Not”).

Considering that it is the general manager’s job to be aware of the players in the 30-team NHL, it is surprising that the Blackhawks still put confidence in a man that not only lacked this knowledge, but also would not publicly acknowledge its value. There were also other possible candidates within the organization that were not only passed over for the position, but actually fired for their ties to Mike Smith. The Blackhawks’ assistant GM, Nick Beverly, and the Director of Player Evaluation, Marshall Johnston, were among four employees let go once Pulford took over (Frei). Both of these candidates did have in depth knowledge of the players in the league, and might have fit the job description much better than Pulford did. However, they were not nearly as close to Wirtz’s ear as Pulford was.

The drama did not stop here. So far, the Blackhawks, amidst infighting in their organization, had fired their general manager, replaced him with a loyal but possibly ill-fitting executive – who then proceeded to fire four employees who might have been better fit for the job – and then on top of this, were refusing to pay the salary that they owed to Mike Smith (Frei). When Pulford took the reins, he believed he would be in charge for a while – possibly because he had held the position before and was familiar with being handed powerful positions. He was quoted as saying “the Hawks will look for as long as possible to find the right guy” and it was

speculated he would be with them through the lockout (Foltman, “Smith Not”). However, Wirtz had other ideas, and quickly hired Dale Tallon, the Hawks’ TV-radio color commentator and former director of player personnel. Tallon was to be Pulford’s “heir apparent” and in an interview Tallon indicated that he would work under Pulford until he learned enough to take over as general manager (Foltman, “Wirtzes Turn to Tallon”). Pulford took exception to this and commented back publicly, saying “there is no obligation . . . [that] Dale will be the general manager. I don’t know where that came from” (Foltman, “Tallon May Not”). He indicated that there was no clear “succession plan” or “time limit”. In fact, he stated that he’d be in charge of the team for at least the rest of the season, and probably the next season because it is a lockout (Foltman, “Tallon May Not”). Clearly, he believed that the position was his to work with, not Tallon’s to work for. The next day, Wirtz publicly contradicted his right hand man, saying that Tallon was indeed on track to become general manager; and sources from the team told the Tribune that Wirtz was “furious” with Pulford’s comments (Foltman, “Wirtz Scolds GM”).

This entire situation spells out the issues with the Blackhawks’ top level management. William Wirtz allowed Pulford too many liberties as an executive. Pulford, as Senior Vice President, was comfortable assuming his place in the organization and making comments not representative of the owners’ views. It is possible that he felt entitled – long loyal to his friend’s organization, to him it felt natural to assume an important role like general manager – after all, his many years with the organization qualified him, not his specific knowledge or skill-set. By allowing an atmosphere like this, Wirtz possibly missed out on opportunities to better his organization. Firing four qualified employees because of their loyalties, filling positions with close friends – both actions cause the organization to miss out on great people that can truly help the franchise. It causes bad publicity, as the whole situation turns into a “soap opera” – the

media is more interested in the front office than the product on the ice, which does not bode well for the team.

It also creates internal problems, sending a message about how employees at the Blackhawks are valued. If you are close with the boss, you get what you want. But just doing your job well is not enough to be considered for important and powerful roles within the company. What incentive then, does this leave for employees to do their best? Very little, if they will always be passed over by friends of the boss, despite their hard work. It also sends a message to fans – the Blackhawks are not concerned with finding the best general manager, with true talent in finding the best players to create the best product to put on the ice. No, they are interested in keeping old friends happy, even at the expense of their team, their image, and their employees. Furthermore, the Blackhawks were unable to work through this internally – instead, it all happened via press conferences and interviews. Communication was so poor between Wirtz, Tallon, and Pulford that Pulford found out about Wirtz’s plans for Tallon during a press conference. Then, instead of speaking with his boss, Pulford publicly stated that he would be general manager for the foreseeable future – something he had never been explicitly told, but that he’d just assumed. This ended up embarrassing everyone involved, and led to media assessments of the Blackhawks as a “comedy” rather than a business.

### **Misguided fan philosophy**

In the early 2000’s, the Blackhawks clearly did not have the best-fitting leaders in place at the top of their organization. The lack of role knowledge and honest communication was leading to internal dissatisfaction and external negative publicity. Additionally, it was the business strategy of these very executives that most visibly contributed to the Blackhawks’ decline.

Almost any company will preach – in one way or another – the old additive: “the customer is always right”. That is the job of any business – to understand who their customers are, to understand what those customers want or need, and to provide an offering that satisfies that want or need better than, or at less cost than, the competition. The sporting industry is like all other industries in that it is difficult – if not impossible – to please everyone. However, the sporting industry differentiates itself with its high visibility and publicity – everyone can see the “product” on the ice, and everyone can have their own “expert” opinion on how the team should be run. In this case, the customer is not always right. Teams cannot always listen to every fan – they cannot just trade a player on a whim just because he blows a game in the final seconds, they cannot always refrain from trading a fan favorite if they believe it is the best move for the team. These are not decisions that should be left to the fans. However, that does not exempt a team from listening closely to the other things their fans are saying – or conducting research to understand the things the fans may not be saying, but may be feeling. In fact, it provides a greater incentive for the team to understand its fans – to know who they are, or what motivates them, or how they can best serve them. Why? Because sports cannot be completely scripted – they are unpredictable. The true “product” cannot be forecasted. A team never knows when injuries might ruin a season, or when they might strike lightning and win a championship. The crux of sport marketing is being able to attract, maintain, engage, and develop your fanbase despite an uncertain product.

It is a difficult task, but at the root of all of this is the fan. If an organization is truly in touch with their fans, they are better able to find and provide offerings that their fans value and would be willing to pay for. For example, are fans coming for the brand, the tradition, the team, the promotions, the game experience, or a combination of these factors? This requires a fan-



centered philosophy – something that top level management within the Blackhawks organization did not embrace. Blackhawks owner, William Wirtz, was consistently described as a “stubborn” man. According to Bob Verdi, it was clear that Mr. Wirtz loved his Blackhawks, “but not more than business principles passed on to him by [his father] Arthur” (Verdi, “Wirtz Not Easily”). However, times had changed, and while standing by your principles is admirable, ignoring the interests of the fans can kill an organization.

Most notably, Wirtz is famous for his refusal to air home games on television (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). His reasoning behind this was loyalty to his season ticket holders. He felt that it was only fair to his season ticket holders that all fans should have to pay in order to see a game. He feared that fans would stop coming to the United Center if they could just see the game on television. But fans had already stopped coming to the United Center. In 2003, Joe Knowles of the Chicago Tribune wrote that the “Hawks have one of the highest percentages of unfilled seats in all of professional sports” (Knowles). That season they were only at a 72% capacity – by the 2006-07 season, they were down to 62% (Exhibit 1). Wirtz’s inadvisable decision stunted any growth the Blackhawks could have hoped for. Any fans curious enough to want to check out Chicago’s nearly invisible hockey team had to wait for an away game just to get a glimpse of them (unless they were willing to buy tickets). Wirtz believed this policy would encourage fans to attend games. But he didn’t understand his fans – they weren’t staying away because they had already gotten their fill on TV, they were staying away because the Blackhawks had no relevance in their lives. Why spend money on something that they saw no value in? How could they even see value when the team was blacked out from their televisions?

The Blackhawks’ business strategy was to decide what would be considered valuable and that was the product he offered, rather than listening to his fans and allowing the demand to pull

the direction of his offerings. The Blackhawks were content with putting their product out there in whatever form they wished and hoping that fans responded. One way the Blackhawks tried to do this was with player appearances. In the 2005-2006 season, Craig Anderson appeared at the Barrington Expo, while Mark Bell appeared at DePaul University – both players were put on location to meet with fans and promote the Blackhawks (“Anderson” & “Mark Bell”). However, that was all they did – and since the Blackhawks held little or no relevance, these appearances meant very little to the different people they came into contact with. Possibly, the appearances could have been more effective with the use of an integrated marketing campaign, with giveaways or other tie-ins that would make the player’s appearances resonate more with fans – and possibly lead to higher engagement. Fans do not simply walk past a ticket office or a Blackhawks player and decide to buy tickets; instead, fans are likely to need to feel a sense of engagement with the team first. There was no additional marketing support to help build this engagement, which made these player appearances futile in terms of fan connection. A team cannot force people to become fans– and by blacking out games on television, Wirtz was forcing fans to take a leap of faith and attend a game, without a cohesive supporting marketing strategy to communicate the Blackhawks brand and connect fans to the organization.

A failed promotion from the 2006 season shows the inadequacy of the using only one-off marketing stunts when there are very few engaged fans. The Blackhawks sent out emails to their database, offering 200 free tickets to a game, and only half of them were taken (Mickle, Lombardo, & Muret). This shows that just offering tickets and hoping that people showed up was not enough. The fans were seeing no value in the team – they wouldn’t even go watch them for free. Clearly, there was a need for innovation to create value and then communication to demonstrate this value.

Not only did Wirtz's outdated policies and marketing strategies impede the growth of the franchise, but it also hurt the very season ticket holders he was trying to protect. The free tickets offered to fans in various promotions like the one mentioned above were seats in prime locations – some as close as four rows from the ice (Benderoff). Meanwhile, season ticket holders were left paying for their seats, many of them in less ideal locations than the free seats offered to non-season ticket holders. In doing this, Blackhawks management was virtually telling them that the seats that they were paying thousands of dollars for had no value, and could be given away for free to whoever wanted them. How is this showing respect to season ticket holders?

Additionally, what would motivate a fan to become a season ticket holder if he/she knew that the tickets he/she was paying thousands for could actually be free? The double standard here is glaring. Wirtz cared too much about his season ticket holders to put Blackhawks home games on television – therefore forgoing opportunities to grow his fan base – but was okay with expecting his season ticket holders to pay thousands of dollars for their seats while he handed out free tickets to fans in order to “paper the house”. (Benderoff)

Additionally, season ticket holders would have benefited from airing home games on television. Televised games allow people to sample the team. Watching games on television is a small commitment – an easy first step. It allows fan engagement to build over time, and for attachments and loyalties to be formed. The airing of home games would have enforced this – it could have showcased the atmosphere at the arena, and in fact would act as an advertisement for Blackhawks hockey. Even if the team on the ice was not winning, surrounding features like charismatic announcers or interesting player features could have been used to reach fans on a different level. The sports fan is emotional and invested; television could have aided in creating and building this investment in the team. As familiarity increased, more people might have

wanted to try to attend games, which would also be beneficial to season ticket holders. With the United Center half empty each night, part of the atmosphere of an exciting sporting event was missing. The roar of a large and passionate crowd can contribute to the exhilaration of a live sporting event just as much as the game itself. The days of Chicago Stadium's atmosphere had long been reminisced upon because of the excitement of the crowd. Terry Frei of the Denver Post described the days "when the fans' decibel level was amazing, the organ nearly blew the roof off the joint, and the Bulls at one time were jealous of the hockey team's attendance" (Frei). Bringing back this roar by attracting more fans would surely have been a positive thing for season ticket holders.

An extension of this is being able to recognize value in other aspects of your organization – outside of ticket sales. Wirtz's television policies came from his view that showing games on television would cause decreases in ticket sales (Vardi, "Chicago's Comeback"). It is this belief that his loyalty to season ticket holders originated from – he wanted to reward those that came to games. This is not a bad idea in itself, but it was extreme and outdated, and it ignored any other opportunity that might increase interest and engagement. It is true that ticket sales lead to the bottom line – revenue. But if fans do not see value in ticket sales, then an organization must adapt. They must work not only to create value in ticket sales, but also search elsewhere for further opportunities. This is where the Blackhawks needed to understand that season ticket holders were more frustrated with "papering the house" than they were with people watching home games on television for free. Fans wanted a team that reached out to them, that showed that it cared – and that didn't close them out. A team that truly listens to its fans will not only be able to better understand and serve its fans, but it will also gain their respect.

Wirtz was largely unable to understand these intricacies of marketing to fans. He was stubbornly loyal to season ticket holders, but to a fault. His mistake was in assuming that he knew what his fans wanted from the Blackhawks as an organization, and that he was doing his best to provide it. However, the people of Chicago did not seem to agree, and showed their displeasure by staying away from the United Center. There was little opportunity to cultivate new fans, and ample forces driving long-time fans away.

### **Lack of Success and a Lack of a Winning Philosophy**

The Blackhawks' fan philosophy was not suited for marketing a professional sports team. The uncertainty of a team's performance on the ice means that innovation is needed to create value elsewhere – something that was never attempted by Blackhawks management. This uncertainty, however, is a large part of the offering of a sports team. The outcome is unknown – the value in this is that people want to watch to find out what is going to happen. The risk of this uncertainty occurs when the team performs badly – which was unfortunately the case for the Blackhawks. However, the reward is that fans are attracted to the *chance* of winning. An organization that convinces its fans that winning – and winning now – is of upmost importance is more likely to keep the attention and respect of its fans.

### **Team Performance**

The simple truth was: the team was bad. As of 2007, the Blackhawks had only made the playoffs twice in ten years. Most seasons, “the Blackhawks . . . hovered near the bottom of the standings in a league in which more than half the teams make the postseason” (Benderoff). In 2001, coach Brett Sutter, referring to his team's fortunes the past few years, stated: “There is nothing that has gone on here that is acceptable” (Kennedy). Two seasons later, despite the addition of highly-touted 2001 first round draft pick, Tuomo Ruutu (Foltman, “Ruutu Arrives”), the Blackhawks were even worse, finishing the season with a “league-worst 20 wins” (Yen). It

was during this arduous season that the Minnesota Star Tribune dubbed hockey in Chicago a place where “masochistic fans come to feel sick to their stomachs and opposing teams come to get well” (Snow). Even Chicago’s AHL team, the Wolves, got a dig in at the Blackhawks. They started a new slogan, clearly aimed at the free-falling Hawks, saying: “We play hockey the old-fashioned way. We win” (Greenstein).

Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on how one looks at it – the 2004-05 season was cancelled due to the NHL lockout. However, this news – which should have been met with the sighs of disappointed hockey fans – was actually a welcome break from the constant losses for some. Redeye Chicago’s “Bag Boy”, an anonymous writer intended to represent Chicago sports fans with his columns, wrote: “My heartfelt gratitude goes out to the Blackhawks for ensuring the season won’t begin. If I had to sit through one more period of the dump-and- chuck-and-miss-and-allow-other- team-to-light-the-lamp, I’m in the UC men’s room sobbing” (“Listening to”). The lockout lasted just one season, and afterwards, armed with a newly-formed salary cap, the Blackhawks tried to add a few big names to the roster, signing Nikolai Khabibulin and Adrian Aucoin, among others (Yen). However, their star players didn’t perform as expected, and injuries took their toll on the team (Foltman, “Tallon Churns”). Disappointingly, they finished the next two seasons under .500 and once again, out of the playoffs (“Chicago Blackhawks Statistics”). It was clear that the team’s fortunes were in desperate need for a turnaround. It was hard for fans to continually watch as their team struggled, knowing the playoffs were an impossible dream.

In addition to the Blackhawks’ poor performance, team character and chemistry were also lacking. The Blackhawks began the 2002-03 season in fine shape, with a 21-15-8-3 record by the end of January (Foltman, “Strip-club”). However, their fortunes changed when right

winger Theo Fleury was forcefully kicked out of a Columbus night club, along with two other players, sustaining minor injuries after bouncers “treated him like a piñata” (Foltman, “Strip-club”). This was after Fleury had spent the first 25 games of the season suspended for violating the NHL’s substance-abuse program (Foltman, “Fleury Tied”). The incident created a week of negative publicity for the Blackhawks, and fan-favorite Steve Sullivan admitted that team management did not deal with it well. After that incident, the Hawks went into free-fall mode, amassing just 20 wins their next 83 games (Foltman, “Strip-club”). Hockey Digest reported that the incident “clouded the impressionable locker room” (“Chicago Blackhawks”), and Bob Foltman of the Chicago Tribune asserted that “just about every Hawks executive blamed last season’s collapse on Fleury and what happened in Columbus” (Foltman, “Strip-club”).

It is obvious why this altercation was hurtful to the team and to fans. There were most likely locker room issues due to the irresponsible and selfish actions of a small group of players. It is difficult to play with and trust a teammate that is consistently getting into trouble – and seems to care more about partying than about hockey. Additionally, the incident sparked management to impose leisure time restrictions on the rest of the players – they stayed in different parts of town and were forbidden from visiting certain establishments (Foltman, “Strip-club”). The rest of the team was being disciplined for the actions of a few players – something that could certainly cause resentment. In the end, it turned into an incredibly costly incident for the Blackhawks, begging the question: could it have been avoided? According to the Chicago Tribune, Fleury had been “a lightning rod for controversy wherever he has played” (Foltman, “Strip-club”), and Hockey Digest called the signing a “gamble” (“Chicago Blackhawks”). Fleury was signed during a time that the Hawks continuously claimed was a “rebuilding period”



– so it is a mystery why Mike Smith acting as general manager would have taken a “gamble” on a drug-addict when he would be surrounded by a large amount of young, impressionable rookies.

The bad impressions continued into the next season, this time from center Tyler Arnason and Coach Brian Sutter. The Chicago Tribune reported an incident in which “Sutter got in Arnason’s face, pushed him against a wall and tried to goad him into a fight” (Milbert). This is the second time Arnason had been involved in an altercation – he was also one of the two other players involved in Fleury’s bar fight in Columbus. Fortunately, this time, the public relations team was able to deal with the problem swiftly – preventing a much larger mess, though surely it still left teammates and fans frustrated. In addition, Blackhawks general manager Dale Tallon seemed to believe that this character problem spread further than Arnason. He said of the 03-04 team: “We didn’t have a lot of character. We didn’t play hard every night” (Yen). A team described such as this is unlikely to go far both on the ice and with fans. As a fan, it is much easier to root for a team that plays hard and has character. If a team looks as if they are just going through the motions and not truly caring, then why would the fan be expected to care? Furthermore, one way to help promote fan engagement is through players with good character – fans are more likely to relate to and then pay attention to players they can connect with, or that they respect. Unfortunately, with the negative publicity surrounding the team, this was something that it would have been very hard for the Blackhawks to tap into.

Despite the fact that the actions of players and the outcome of games are uncontrollable, there are certain things that can be partially controlled to either give the team a better chance at succeeding, or to encourage fans to believe in your organization. In the next sections, I will examine the Blackhawks’ old hockey operations practices and the message they sent to both players and fans.

### **Lack of a Winning Philosophy**

William Wirtz was widely known by his nickname “Dollar Bill” due to his “perceived unwillingness to spend money on players” (Mickle, Lombardo, and Muret). The Blackhawks seemed to be in a constant state of rebuilding. When Dale Tallon was placed under the tutelage of general manager Bob Pulford in 2003, Chicago Tribune columnist Bob Verdi cracked: “What’s Tallon going to learn from Bob Pulford except how to start the next five-year rebuilding plan during the third year of the last five-year rebuilding plan?” (Verdi, “City of Low”). The benefit of this strategy was a lean payroll. The Blackhawks began the 2003-2004 season with a payroll of just \$33.5 million, down twenty-five percent from the previous year, and an amount believed to put “considerable financial constraints” on the team in terms of acquiring talent (Frei). Plus, by calling it “rebuilding” every time the roster was stuffed with new AHL call-ups, the Blackhawks could claim that they were working on building for the future, rather than just scrapping the present. However, after years of “futures” the fans and the media were starting to see straight through this. Reflecting on past “rebuilding” claims, Bob Foltman of the Chicago Tribune pointed out: “Still, some long-time Hawk watchers wonder whether this season’s Igor Radulov is just a later version of Dmitri Nabokov, and whether Tuomo Ruutu is an updated Dan Cleary” (Foltman, “Unsettling Foundation”). To Hawks fans, “rebuilding” had become an excuse rather than a strategy. While Wirtz saw the payroll as an excessive amount that reflected the state of the league and the greed of the players, the fans saw this as a cheap attempt by a stingy owner to put a mediocre team on the ice.

At this point, it was not so much a problem of the Blackhawks not winning – though that was certainly a problem - as a case of the fans believing the Blackhawks didn’t care about winning. It was difficult for fans to take any efforts seriously when the organization not only refused to sign big name players, but also traded away their top talent the second they started to

blossom. A series of trades in early 2004 was deemed a way to “insult what few Blackhawks fans remain” (“Shrinking Dollar”) by Brian Gandy of the Chicago Tribune, and even the Pittsburgh Post chimed in, questioning: “Is a franchise really worth saving when it unloads Alexei Zhamnov, Steve Sullivan and others?” (“New NHL Game”). Instead, the Blackhawks loaded their roster with rookies and less talented players. In fact, the 2003-04 team had a league-high 13 rookies on the roster (Yen) and had to use six different goalies to get through the season (Marrapese-Burrell). These moves made one thing clear to fans – Blackhawks management cared more about money than winning. Additionally, fans didn’t have to look far to find out what their team could have been if they had been willing to spend money to keep talent – a quick glance at the rosters of playoff teams showed that many ex-Blackhawks were enjoying success elsewhere (Change Perception?).

Fans and media consistently called Bill Wirtz out on his money and team management policies. The Chicago Tribune’s Brian Gandy called out Wirtz for using fan loyalty to “line his pockets with millions of dollars”, but with no results (“Shrinking Dollar”). Bob Verdi, upset that the more forward-thinking Dale Tallon was still second in command to current general manager Bob Pulford, cracked: “Bob Pulford is ahead of [Tallon], with the mission of shaving the team’s payroll to \$2.99 before the lockout and the promise that the Hawks will buy a bunch of great free agents when labor and management settle” (Verdi, “Our Winter”). Blackhawks fan and Chicago Tribune contributor, Erik Johnson, spoke for many fans when he said he would no longer be spending any money on the Blackhawks until there is something to spend money on, writing, “the product to organ-I-zation has put on the ice the past few years is pathetic”. He then went on to deliver an ultimatum: “It’s time for Mr. Wirtz to make a decision: Spend the money to return the team to glory and acquire some players who know how to play the game, or sell the team to

someone who cares about winning” (Johnson). It was an ultimatum that Bill Wirtz should have heard – a sometimes unspoken but many times loudly proclaimed decision that many fans had made; but it never reached his ears because he never opened them.

Yet another party affected by the Blackhawks’ stingy money management was the players themselves. On the surface, the connection was obvious: the Blackhawks refused to shell out large salaries, and therefore those players that could command large salaries never considered the Blackhawks. However, the problem ran deeper than just salary figures. The Blackhawks were cheap all around. The players flew commercial until the late 1990’s, they didn’t receive preferred parking during travel, they had to occupy a very small locker room, and they had to return everything at the end of the season, including their \$55 hockey bags (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). Not only does this take away any fringe benefits for players, but it also sends them a message – they aren’t worth it. This message was buttressed by Wirtz and Pulford’s complaints that players in the current NHL were spoiled rotten, splurging and driving around nice cars bought with their outrageous salaries – salaries that they did not believe they deserved (Downey). It is likely that many players did not wish to play for a man that did not value their talents the way they believed they should be valued. Finally, there was the small matter of the Blackhawks’ abysmal attendance. With the arena half full on most nights, the atmosphere in Chicago felt dead and empty. It made Chicago a much less attractive option than other teams with a more engaged fanbase.

Part of having a winning philosophy is being dissatisfied with mediocrity. Teams cannot get complacent; they cannot be satisfied with just playing hard. It is important to show fans a sense of urgency, to show them that the organization recognizes its issues, is not happy with them, and will be doing everything in its power to fix the problem and start winning. When fans

are unhappy with a team's performance, they want to see that the organization is just as unhappy as they are, and ready to take action. This was not the case with the Blackhawks, who cited their longstanding rebuilding process and youth movement – which had yet to yield any results – as an excuse for not winning. Head coach Brian Sutter went so far as to say: “You don't rate how a team is doing by winning and losing” (“Lowly Blackhawks”). The media jumped on this. An article in the Chicago Tribune sarcastically remarked, “. . . being shut out by Pittsburgh might be viewed as a step backward. But the Hawks apparently believe they should be judged by a different standards” (“Lowly Blackhawks”).

These comments came during the 2003-2004 season, when the Hawks had amassed a twelve game road losing streak. Any fans who had witnessed these losses – and it is worthwhile to remember that road games were the only televised games – would likely have been upset, looking for answers from their team. Instead, they were basically told that winning did not matter. Fans at the time were getting tired of the rebuilding efforts that yielded no results, yet their organization refused to acknowledge this. In fact, Sutter went on to take a shot at the fans, saying, “If people want to talk about Jeremy Roenick and the four or five years they didn't make the playoffs before I got here, then they don't understand what it takes to build a team” (Foltman, “Unsettling Foundation”). Frustrated statements such as this are not uncommon in sports, usually coming from coaches that feel cornered from having to answer for something they have not been able to fix. The Blackhawks certainly were not alone as a team with coaches that call out fans for criticizing the team. However, these comments not only showed fans how little the team cared about winning in the present, but also served to attack the few fans the team had left, just for being angry with something that they had the right to be angry about. This was not something the Blackhawks could afford to do.

The truth was, everyone in Chicago was sick of hearing that their team was trying. At the end of the 2004 season, finishing as the worst team in the NHL, the Hawks weren't talking about how to turn it around; instead they were looking for some credit. Brian Sutter surely did not win any supporters with his comments on the season: "We've come a long ways this year. We could have hung our hats up and taken our boots off a long time ago and we haven't. We haven't gotten credit for that. . ." (Marrapese-Burrell). This statement was practically an insult to fans, who paid money and supported their team, and were apparently supposed to just be happy with whatever they get. Any other business would not be able to operate this way – competitors would sweep any dissatisfied customers up in a second. Bob Verdi called out the Hawks – and the rest of the Chicago teams at the time – on this very point, saying, "In no other line of work—and, regrettably, in no other major-league market—would this be tolerated", but in Chicago, he asserts "rooting is tantamount to groveling" (Verdi, "City of Low"). When fans are reduced to having to beg their team to do anything positive, and when the team believes fans should be happy that they are at least trying, it isn't difficult to see why fans might stop paying attention.

Verdi continued with this argument, writing: "Since when does [trying] constitute a bonus for the customer? I can't remember the last time I read a story out of New York that read, 'Although the Yankees return after being swept on their West Coast trip, they gave it a good effort'" (Verdi, "City of Low"). This statement sounds ridiculous, but it was these types of things the Blackhawks fans continued to hear, and soon they just stopped watching. Meanwhile, this philosophy was maintained by the Blackhawks over the next few years; the Chicago Tribune reported that 2006-07 coach Trent Yawney suggested his team had to just "keep working at it" (Foltman, "As Losses Mount"). Once again, however, the article pointed out that, "There's not much more they can do, but it's very apparent that working hard isn't enough. Every team works

hard in the NHL—for the most part—canceling out the effort factor” (Foltman, “As Losses Mount”). It’s this very point that shows how insufficient the Blackhawks’ assurances of “trying” were. They looked for credit when they finished as the worst team in the league, and they expected fans to be fine as long as they put in some effort. Yet after a while, fans wanted to actually see the effort, not just hear about it.

The goal in any sport is to win – players try to go to the teams that give them their best chance at this, while fans are more likely to engage with their team when they still have a chance to go all the way. However, the perception was that Blackhawks were too busy trading away star players and experimenting to see how low their payroll could drop to care about winning. It is this very lack of evidence of a drive to win that magnified the issues created by a poorly performing team and a small payroll. The problem was not that Bill Wirtz and other upper level management didn’t care about the success of the team. They did. NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly remembered Bill Wirtz saying: “He was very passionate about his hockey team. When it struggled, no one hurt more than Bill Wirtz” (Mickle, Lombardo, and Muret). Wirtz loved hockey, and certainly like any team owner, he wanted to win, as did everyone in the organization. But the penny-pinching player strategies and the public excuses for and acceptance of poor performance showed that the Blackhawks organization lacked a winning philosophy. They might have wanted to win, but they didn’t want it badly enough to re-examine their techniques or spend money on building a team, nor did they even expect to win. Additionally, the Blackhawks were much less vocal about assembling a winning team than they were about other initiatives – sending yet another message to fans.

### **Outspoken and Stubborn on Controversial Matters**

As the Blackhawks struggled on and off the ice, it became clear that the priorities of the fans and the priorities of the organization did not match up. The Blackhawks touted their so far



unsuccessful rebuilding efforts while fans demanded increased urgency about winning in the present. Rather than adjusting the organizational philosophy to suit the needs of fans, Blackhawks management kept on the same path. While ignoring fans, they were instead vocally concerned with two main things: their money and their pride. Each of these raised the ire of fans and left them questioning who management was trying to serve.

As discussed previously, Blackhawks executives emphasized a small payroll – even if that came at the expense of wins and losses. This philosophy frustrated fans and media alike, but what accompanied it damaged the organization’s reputation even further. Wirtz, Pulford, and Tallon blamed greedy players for their inability to assemble a successful team without losing large amounts of money. Pulford was quoted as saying: “When we played, we drove Chevrolets. Now they drive Mercedes- Benzes” (Downey). Tallon added that when he was a player, they almost played for free: “It was a privilege to play in the NHL for us. We have to get that feeling back” (Downey). These comments came on the day that the NHL officially canceled the 2004-05 season when the players union and the owners could not come to a new labor agreement; it was the third lockout in NHL history, and Blackhawks executives had been very vocal on the side of the owners throughout the proceedings. In fact, the Wall Street Journal asserts that Bill Wirtz was “widely credited – or blamed – for leading the lockout” (Belkin).

However, a fight between millionaires and billionaires is about the last thing that will endear any organization in the hearts of fans. Blackhawks fans were especially sick of the ‘poor millionaire’ complaints – they were used to their organization’s stingy methods. Wirtz added to the charges against him when he refused to pay general manager Mike Smith the rest of the money owed to him in his contract after firing him (Gandy, “Hawks’ Wirtz Enemy”). The media and fans were not surprised: “It is typical of the approach that has gotten the franchise into this

mess” (Frei). Not only that, but Wirtz was perfectly okay with paying lawyers to uphold his voiding of Smith’s contract, a further blow to fans who wanted to see that money go towards assembling a quality team (Gandy, “Hawks’ Wirtz Enemy”). Wirtz’s wealth and concern for money served as a reminder to fans that the money was not being translated into success on the ice (Belkin). Fans in Chicago wanted a quality team and an engaged organization – but the franchise’s comments and actions showed that the real ruler was the dollar.

Interestingly enough, none of this did the Blackhawks any good. A more helpful action would have been to begin talks with television providers about airing home games, or – as I will discuss in the next paragraph – recognize and start to value fan-favorite team players and personalities. Instead, the Blackhawks threw their efforts towards ensuring that a salary cap was instilled. They believed that “cost certainty” (“Anatomy”) was the key to re-invigorating not only their team, but the league. Instead, at the end of the 2006-07 season – two seasons after a new collective bargaining agreement gave the owners the cost certainty they were looking for – the Blackhawks were still bleeding money, losing \$31 million in their most recent season, and that was with a salary cap (Westhead). Wirtz had gotten what he had fought so hard for and still was unable to garner any results. Even with their primary excuse of excessive player salaries taken away, the Blackhawks were still struggling, and still preserving wealth as their number one priority.

Money – as well as stubbornness and pride – also led to the alienation of certain beloved Blackhawks players and personalities, and in turn, the fans. As I have discussed before, the Blackhawks’ obsession with penny-pinching had not only hindered their attempts at attracting talent, but also resulted in their failures to retain some of their all-time greats. Most notably, in 1972, “Mr. [Arthur] Wirtz courted fans’ wrath by failing to re-sign Mr. [Bobby] Hull” (Belkin).

Hull was a Blackhawks legend, helping the Blackhawks to a 1961 Stanley Cup Championship. Not only was he one of the most talented players in hockey, but fans loved him; the Blackhawks' failure to re-sign him "is widely considered only slightly less a blunder than the Red Sox's decision to trade Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1919" (Belkin). Fans saw this as an even worse offense since Hull claimed that he "had made it clear he wanted to stay in Chicago but the Blackhawks didn't approach him with a contract until he had already reached a deal with the Winnipeg Jets of the now-defunct World Hockey Association" (Belkin).

Arthur Wirtz also asserted that he wanted to keep Hull in Chicago (Belkin), but that did not matter to fans. Hull was a symbol of Blackhawks hockey – his relationship with fans was a "love affair" (Rosenbloom, "Bobby Hull"), and to have that taken away dealt a huge blow to fans. Fans did not want to hear about how a millionaire owner was unable to pay to keep arguably the best player ever to put on a Blackhawks sweater; they were angry, and nothing but the return of Hull would have placated them. Hull's departure was the beginning of a long-time dispute with the Blackhawks (Belkin).

The Blackhawks never sought to repair relations with Bobby Hull, which damaged their reputation with fans who would always side Hull. Fans saw this as a stubborn and prideful refusal to admit error, and it did not paint the Blackhawks in a favorable light. Throughout the years, fans were reminded of the feud. For example, when Hull chose to sell his Stanley Cup ring, he balked at the idea of it taking a place in the United Center:

Ooh, I don't know about that. The general manager there, Bob Pulford, wouldn't want my ring around there. He didn't want me around there, I know that. He had a chance to get my son, Brett, a number of times, but Pulford never wanted to touch Brett because it

would have meant I'd have gone to the games. Pulford didn't like that. We might have sold too many tickets. (Verdi, "Hawking It All")

The specter of what the team could have been with Hull always lingered for fans. Especially when the Hawks hit hard times, the memory of what happened with Bobby Hull was yet another reminder of what fans perceived the Blackhawks truly cared about: money and stubborn pride. Memories of Bobby Hull – The Golden Jet – and other Blackhawks greats could have been warmly remembered and embraced – possibly keeping more fans in the seats. Instead, tradition was swept aside, and fans were left to deal with the present, which was usually painful to watch.

Though Blackhawks fans were forced to listen to home games on the radio, there was one bright spot for them: radio play-by-play man, Pat Foley. In 2004, Redeye Chicago named him Chicago's best play-by-play man: "so good, you sometimes forget you're listening to the Hawks" ("Airing It Out"). His famous call of "B-a-a-a-a-a-nerman" became a shared battle cry for many die hard Blackhawks fans (Verdi, "Foley Has Been"). However, at the end of the 2005-06 season, Foley was abruptly let go, just ten days after the Blackhawks had announced that they had re-signed him (Chicago Blackhawks, "Chicago Blackhawks and Pat Foley"). "No sugarcoating it: I got fired," Foley recalls of the situation. For an organization with little else to point to in terms of value for its fans, this was not a wise decision. Fans were already upset that they had to listen to home games on the radio rather than watch them on the television, and now the one thing that had made these games truly enjoyable – the voice Blackhawks hockey – had been silenced. The Wolves quickly gobbled Foley up (Verdi, "Foley Has Been") – they were, after all, the AHL team doing everything that Chicago's resident NHL team should have been doing, but was not. This once again shows a case in which Blackhawks management let whatever internal disputes that had occurred between them and Foley get in the way of what was

best for the fans. In fact, Foley thought he had “zero” chance of ever returning to the Blackhawks after being fired. As it turns out, Foley was wrong, and his return, which will be discussed in-depth later, re-invigorated long-time fans.

So far, this paper has outlined the large problems that had the Blackhawks in disarray up until the summer of 2007. The franchise undervalued their human resources and allowed loyalty to become the deciding factor in key executive hiring decisions. The Blackhawks’ fan philosophy centered around the gut feelings of ownership and outdated practices, rather than around understanding and engaging fans. The team itself was not performing on the ice – but fans blamed management for this, citing their history of emphasizing a low payroll at the expense of keeping talent. The words and actions of the organization revealed that they lacked a winning philosophy – and this is exactly what the fans saw. Instead of concentrating on building a strong team or reaching out to fans, the Blackhawks prioritized money and pride, driving away some of the most beloved figures in the organization’s history. Fans were tired of hoping that next year might be better. As one fan stated, “The Blackhawks have done their best to remove themselves from the Chicago Sports Landscape, so it is only fitting that we vote them out of town” (“Interleague Play”). However, not all of the issues were created internally. The state of the NHL itself also contributed to the Blackhawks’ irrelevance in the sports scene.

### **Issues in the NHL**

As a franchise, the Blackhawks were doing very little to help their cause; however, the state of the NHL certainly contributed to their struggles. Hockey in America had fallen far from the major sports scene. The league rarely graced front pages or garnered headlines in any city – unless there was controversy involved. In 2004, fans were more likely to hear about Todd Bertuzzi’s violent hit to Steve Moore or the impending lockout (and along with it, the greed of

everyone involved with the game), than anything that actually had to do with the game itself (“Ugly Incident”). With nothing but negative publicity surrounding the NHL for the most part, it is unlikely that the casual fan would want to become more engaged with the sport, or for new fans to want to check out the sport. This resulted in “empty seats in NHL arenas and decimal points for TV ratings” (“Ugly Incident”). Extremely detrimental to the sport were the dismal television ratings in the “country’s major markets, largely because those cities have had losing teams in recent years” (Dater). Due to their relatively large contribution to hockey viewership and bottom line, struggles in the major markets take a much greater toll on the NHL. Good news for hockey was so scarce that Bob Verdi identified the “hockey highlight of the year” as the release of the movie “Miracle on Ice” (“Ugly Incident”).

The Original Six – hockey’s long-revered elite group of teams that started the NHL – was also losing its magic. Memories of the Original Six were synonymous with the idea of “old time hockey” (“Original 6 Runs Out”). However, fewer and fewer people found real meaning in these memories. “People our age remember the Original Six, but for a lot of people, it doesn’t mean anything,” New York Rangers TV analyst John Davidson told the Denver Post (“Original 6 Runs Out”). As the league evolved over the years and expanded, new rivalries were starting to replace the Original Six rivalries, and there were much fewer Original Six matchups each year (“Original 6 Runs Out”). The tradition and history of hockey was being overridden as the league expanded, and hockey was letting go of what it had once held dear. As fewer fans seemed to care, the Original Six was no longer treated as sacred – hockey was losing a part of its lore and its heart. In a healthy league, Original Six matchups could have become great events, where fans young and old gathered to watch two of hockey’s great franchises face off. It could have been used to rekindle interest in the sport, to pass down to generations what the Original Six means to the

NHL. Yet instead, the NHL was allowing their own roots to slip through their grasp and missing out on a large opportunity. This was partially caused by, and also deeply affected, the Blackhawks. Chicago was one of the Original Six teams that was performing so poorly that few wanted to see an Original Six matchup that included them. In addition, the Blackhawks' lack of fan engagement and tradition in their own city was doing nothing to help the Original Six retain its status around the league. In turn, the decreasing popularity of the Original Six was also detrimental to the Blackhawks because their status in this previously-elite group was one of the few things they could boast of as an organization. As the Original Six lost its aura, the Blackhawks lost a selling point.

Problems for the NHL even emanated from the game itself. The game played before the 2004-05 lockout was low-scoring and held little excitement for fans and players alike. When asked to describe the ESPN game of the week he had just played in, Avalanche center Joe Sakic, who is normally not outspoken, stated: "One of the 10 most boring games I've ever been a part of" (Dater). The game had ended in a 1-1 tie and featured "precious few quality scoring chances, little room to skate, spare physical play and more icings than a local bakery" (Dater). A lackluster affair, it was not exactly the result fans were looking to see from the game of the week. Sakic looked the league for creating this mess to begin with: "Anytime you have a 2-0 lead, the refs don't call anything, unless it's against you. Gotta keep it tight, keep it tight. That's what the league wants, I guess. Tight games" (Dater). Sakic's teammate, Teemu Selanne also added that the game in 2004 was too defensive: "There's just no goals" (Dater). While good defense and goaltending are undoubtedly appreciated by fans, the goals bring the real excitement to the game – especially for the casual or new fans. While NHL Commissioner was advertising the closeness of games (Dater), the lack of goal scoring took away a good part of that suspense. The



Blackhawks organization was clearly impacted by the state of play in the NHL. With little outside marketing efforts and a deep-seated fan frustration with management, the best thing that the Blackhawks could have offered was an exciting game. However, the rules in the NHL were not constructed in a way that allowed this, and any fans that might have stumbled across Blackhawks hockey – maybe seeing a flash of a road game on television – would not likely have been riveted by what they saw on the ice.

However, with the new collective bargaining agreement came an entirely new game. The lockout “allowed people to really evaluate the game from a distance and not be emotional about it and listen to fans,” said Ron Wilson, coach of the San Jose Sharks. What resulted was a great turnaround, for the game and for fan engagement. Halfway through the 2005-06 season, 41% more goals had been scored than in the first half of the previous season (Foltman, “NHL Clutches”). Why? Bob Foltman of the Chicago Tribune offers a simple answer: “skilled players can flourish if they are allowed to operate without someone draped on their back or constantly whacked across the arms with sticks” (Foltman, “NHL Clutches”). Skill players became more protected as more penalties were called and players could get away with less. This resulted in a more open game in which there are very few stoppages in play, the pace is fast, and “no lead is safe” (Foltman, “NHL Clutches”). Clearly, these changes made the game more appealing to the masses. “This is about the fans on the fringe. This is about the people flipping through the channels who keep going when a hockey game flashes on the screen,” (Hayes). The changes worked for the league. Attendance was up from the 2003-2004 season, and half of the teams opened up the season with their arenas over 98% of their capacity. Even the Blackhawks were reaping some of the rewards, though their attendance average still lagged by about 4,000 behind the league average (Foltman, “NHL Clutches”).

By opening the game up, the NHL added significant value to its product. They increased scoring chances, emphasized speed, and allowed skill players to light the lamp. The new rules restored the idea of ‘anything can happen’ and excitement returned to the game as it became something that casual fans could also appreciate. This should have helped the Blackhawks – and it did, initially, as they saw their attendance for the 2005-2006 season rise from 13,253 to 13,318 (Exhibit 1). However, part of the reason that the rule changes worked so well for the NHL was the sport’s newfound appeal to the masses. Yet, the effect on the Blackhawks was stunted because the Blackhawks still had not found a way to reach the masses. The only fans who were witnessing the changes were the ones already invested in the team. While the NHL was now catching casual fans changing through the channels, the Blackhawks were still expecting fans to make the trip out to home games to check out the newly formed game. However, the rule changes were a step in the right direction in terms of providing a supportive atmosphere for a reinvention of Blackhawks hockey.

Numerous factors contributed to the Chicago Blackhawks disappearance from the Chicago sports setting. Most were under the Blackhawks’ control, but some originated with the league itself. I have outlined the previous state of the organization, not to assign blame, but instead to truly understand where the Blackhawks were as an organization at the end of the 2006-07 season. This will aid in distinguishing just how critical certain actions were to the resurgence of the Chicago Blackhawks. If we are able to understand where the Blackhawks were as a franchise, we are better able to understand how they got to where they are today. Additionally, it helps to explain the importance of the Blackhawks’ massive turnaround and why new strategies were so necessary to revitalize hockey in Chicago.

In the next section, I will detail each of the changes made within the organization, starting with the change in ownership which sparked the revolution. Each sub-section will specifically explore in-depth the actions taken by the new management, their impact on the franchise, and the reasons that these steps helped to transform the Blackhawks. As each facet of the resurgence is examined, I aim to discover why each step was so effective, and what helped convince fans to start coming back.

## **The Resurgence**

The small spike in attendance garnered by the new NHL rule changes did not last long. The following 2006-07 season saw the Blackhawks' attendance numbers fall once again, putting them in second to last in the NHL (Exhibit 1). For an Original Six team in the nation's third largest sports market, the Blackhawks might as well have been in last. But the Blackhawks did have a spark of good luck when it was announced that, for the first time in history, they would have the first pick in the NHL draft. Blackhawks management, as if sensing for the first time that they might need to put in a little effort to create buzz for the team, organized a draft party for fans. For once, the event was a success, selling over 3,200 tickets, more than the team had planned for (Chicago Blackhawks, "Draft Party Attendance"). There were also attempts at fan engagement, as General Manager Dale Tallon was made available via satellite from Columbus to answer fan questions, and Coach Dennis Savard was in attendance at the event to meet with fans (Chicago Blackhawks, "Draft Party Attendance"). The draft party led up to pick of 18-year-old winger Patrick Kane, who would become a key player in the Blackhawks' rise to the top (Oler). Additionally, approximately one month prior, the Blackhawks had also signed young center, Jonathan Toews – who was their first round draft pick in 2006 ("Blackhawks To Introduce"). Armed with young talent, the Blackhawks were hoping to make a splash in the coming season;

however, nothing was guaranteed – Hawks fans were used to having talented players dangled in front of them, only to be lost to injury or other teams. Furthermore, as the NHL rule changes had shown, excitement on the ice was not going to be enough to bring the fans back into the fold. These players would go on to have a profound impact on the organization, but their success was just one factor in an organizational resurgence that spanned the entire franchise.

On September 26, 2007, Blackhawks owner, William Wirtz, passed away at the age of 77 after his battle with cancer (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Mourn”). Many of the most recognized people in hockey gave statements to pay their respects to a man who had been involved in the game since 1954. He may have been a staunch businessman who had made questionable decisions regarding the running of his team, but those closest to him loved and respected him for his intelligence, character, and generosity (“Chairman J. Jacobs”; “NHL Commissioner”; Wittenberg, “Remembering Wirtz”). With Bill’s passing, new leadership needed to be established. His son, Peter Wirtz, was currently serving as executive vice president of the Blackhawks, and was the obvious choice to take his place. However, on October 5, just ten days after his father’s passing, Peter stepped down as vice president and his older brother, Rocky, was appointed as Blackhawks Chairman (Chicago Blackhawks “Rocky Wirtz”). In stepping down, Peter Wirtz assured “my brother brings with him a wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm from my family’s other business and I know he will be successful in leading and directing the team for many years to come” (Wirtz). Peter’s prediction could not have been more accurate, and it was this exact change in direction that sparked the Blackhawks’ return to prominence in Chicago.

In the next sections, I will examine each of the components of the Blackhawks franchise that were created, changed, and even reversed to help the Blackhawks regain popularity in the

city of Chicago. While some changes certainly were more impactful than others, each affected the organization in its own way – some immediate, some slow-building. Yet, it is my assertion that the Blackhawks could not have come back so swiftly and effectively if all of these individual levers were not being pulled in tandem with each other. The key actions taken by the Blackhawks’ new management started with the strong foundation built by Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough, and all of the following initiatives built upon the fan-friendly, success-oriented, and forward-thinking organization that Rocky and John emphasized. Every employee, every idea, every player, every move, every initiative was focused on one thing – One Goal.

### **Personnel Changes**

In the Blackhawks’ first press release when Rocky Wirtz took the reins of the organization, Rocky stated: “We are all focused on putting a winning team on the ice and winning the Stanley Cup” (Chicago Blackhawks “Rocky Wirtz”). Rocky’s entrance began a massive change in tone for the entire organization. He had no business association with the previous Blackhawks management, and therefore fans had nothing against him. He also disagreed with many of his father’s policies – especially his refusal to air home games on TV. Additionally, Rocky saw the importance of engaging with fans. During games, he became known to walk around the stands and have conversations with fans (McGran). This helped the Blackhawks to build a relationship with fans, who appreciated Rocky’s accessibility. Additionally, Rocky put himself in a position to converse with his audience and to learn from them, making him better able to understand what they were interested in and what their perceptions of the Blackhawks were.

Perhaps the greatest impact that Rocky Wirtz’s appointment to chairman had on the Blackhawks resurgence was that Rocky clearly saw an organization that needed to be fixed and a

fanbase that needed to be won back. He did not blame the Blackhawks' attendance woes on the league, or the players – he saw a franchise in flux, an organization that was behind the times, and a once great hockey town that was suffering because of it. Rocky walked into an unenviable situation. Two days into his new job, he found out that “the team needed \$34 million to make it through the hockey season” (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). Wirtz acted fast – he tapped into Wirtz Corp. to lend the team the money it needed (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). However, this move wasn’t just a Band-Aid that he hoped to leave on a gaping wound forever, it was a temporary fix until he could get the team back on its feet again. As the rest of this paper will show, Rocky went on to do many things for the Blackhawks and for the fans, unafraid to do anything necessary to ensure his organization’s success.

Rocky recognized early on that great franchises need great leaders. While Rocky himself was a talented businessman and a capable leader, he knew that to succeed he would need a core group of great executives to support him. He didn’t need yes-men and he didn’t need people that were satisfied with just being good – he needed someone unafraid to take risks to make their team great and someone that wouldn’t be satisfied even if the Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup the next five years in a row. The organization was on the bottom rung of the ladder, nothing short of an extraordinary effort led by extraordinary people was going to bring them to the top.

First, consistent with the idea of “new” that Peter Wirtz’s exit catalyzed, on October 11, less than a week after taking charge of the organization, Rocky Wirtz reassigned Bob Pulford to the position of Vice President of Wirtz Corporation (Chicago Blackhawks “Bob Pulford”). This transition gave Pulford much less influence over the operations within the Blackhawks organization; yet, he was still able to remain a part of the Blackhawks organization as their liaison to the NHL, a position he was well suited for considering his experience and relationships

with the league (Chicago Blackhawks “Bob Pulford”). Pulford’s reassignment also showed a change in tone of the organization – it was no longer about loyalty or friends, it was about results and finding the best person for each role.

Rocky’s next hiring decision is what changed the tide of the Blackhawks organization forever. On November 20, 2007, the Blackhawks announced that they had “named John McDonough to the office of the president” (Chicago Blackhawks “John McDonough Named”). At the time, John McDonough had been working as the team president for the Chicago Cubs; he was described as a “marketing magician” (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”), and a businessman skilled at marketing teams that didn’t necessarily have a winning record. But the Blackhawks weren’t an easy sell – and it took both a clearly communicated vision and persistence for Rocky to convince McDonough to leave the Cubs for the Blackhawks. A mutual friend first reached out to McDonough at Wirtz’s request, but McDonough was happy where he was, saying, “In all due respect, I have a pretty good job right now, but tell Rocky when I get back from these baseball meetings that I’ll give him a call just to say hello” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). Rocky could have been satisfied with this answer, but he insisted on a meeting – before McDonough left for his winter baseball meetings. McDonough agreed, but even after that meeting, he told Rocky the same thing he had said before – that he was already happy with the Cubs. Still not ready to give up, Rocky again called McDonough the following Monday, and finally his persistence paid off when McDonough gave him permission to call Tribune Co – the owner of the Chicago Cubs – and presumably speak with them about bringing McDonough to the Blackhawks. Later that day, the official offer was extended to McDonough, and Rocky finally heard the words he’d been waiting to hear: “I’m in” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). As

the rest of this paper will show, bringing McDonough on as team president was a key move for the Blackhawks' comeback.

When McDonough was brought into the fold, he was amazed to see the paltry staff that the team was relying on to conduct business in one of the biggest sport markets in the country. McDonough set out to fix this quickly. He recognized that not only does a business need talented human capital, true success requires something more: passionate and dedicated employees. It is one thing to be able to do your job; it is another to buy into the organization and to deeply care about what you do and how it affects the organization. Therefore, the first action McDonough took was to hire a human relations manager, telling her to “bring me great here” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). In a matter of weeks, the Blackhawks had increased the value of their human capital – those that did not fit the mold of excellence that John was envisioning were asked to leave, and new employees with a drive to succeed were brought into the organization. “Eight additional players [were added] to drive ticket sales” (Mickle, “Teams To Watch”), and “within weeks the staff doubled to 25 people” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). With a newly-formed Blackhawks front office – combining the best of the old and the new employees – the Blackhawks were much better poised to serve the fans. Additionally, as I will address in the next section, there was a new, more constructive organizational philosophy that each of these employees bought into and contributed to, setting a new foundation upon which the organization would be able to grow.

The final piece of the human resource puzzle was then added when John and Rocky named Jay Blunk – a “22-year sports marketing veteran” – as their senior vice president of business operations in January of 2008 (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blunk Named”). Likely in response to the lack of a business focus under previous management, the position was newly



created for him (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blunk Named”). The move showed the positive direction of the franchise; Blunk’s job description involved “oversee[ing] the team’s marketing operation as well as media, tickets, broadcast and community relations” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blunk Named”). The new position showed the Blackhawks’ newfound dedication to these integral aspects of a sports franchise that had been previously neglected. Within months of the change in ownership, Blackhawks leaders Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough had assembled the people they needed to make them great – now it was a matter of re-forming the organization into a successful enterprise and developing strategies and initiatives to bring fans back into the fold.

### **Organizational Philosophy Changes**

With the right people in place, McDonough’s next move was to change the tone of the Blackhawks internally. It is difficult to market an organization externally when the organization does not have clear direction internally. This was not an issue with the new Blackhawks. Even before McDonough agreed to join the Hawks, he knew how he wanted to run an organization, saying that you have to have the “mind-set that [the team is] going to be 0 and 82”, and adding that “anybody that comes and tells you that you’re not drawing because the team’s bad, you let that person go the day they tell you that” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). McDonough was not interested in excuses. He came from the Chicago Cubs, a team that hadn’t won a World Series since 1908. He had seen first-hand that there are aspects of a team – other than a winning record – that can attract and retain fans. He envisioned a franchise that could be great, regardless of the team’s performance on the ice. This put the success of the organization in the front office’s hands – what they did, or what they failed to do – would be reflected in the performance of the franchise. It gave real meaning to the work that each employee was doing – their efforts (in combination with many other initiatives) were responsible for bringing the fans back – and

therefore they couldn't sit back and wait, they had to take action and find a way to accomplish their goals.

McDonough also worked to instill an accompanying philosophy – never be satisfied with the current state of the franchise. Satisfaction leads to complacency, something that can set a forward organization backwards quite quickly. This viewpoint was established early: “When people expressed satisfaction because a crowd of 14,000 attended a game, 68 percent of capacity, [McDonough] told them it was awful” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). After all, 68 percent full was equivalent to 32 percent empty – and empty seats were not a sign of success, they were a sign that more needed to be done. Never being satisfied however, is not the same thing as refusing to acknowledge progress. In fact, acknowledging progress is an extremely constructive step in this process, because once you understand why your actions resulted in a forward step, you can figure out how to further develop and grow this opportunity. It also helps with increasing employee morale and motivation. This is why both Rocky and McDonough also encouraged a light and positive atmosphere – one that fosters respect, cooperation, and innovation.

McDonough set this environment up while he was setting up his office. Looking back, he says, “I wanted it to be a warm and inviting place. Here, the hockey and business departments work collectively. We're in my office together all the time. We make tough decisions here. I want this to be a place for fertile ideas, innovation, creativity, and advancement” (“John McDonough”). This single statement is full of examples of the effective organizational practices that McDonough not only preached, but also acted upon and passed onto others. First, he speaks of the collaboration between departments, using words like “we” and “together”. The “tough decisions” are not just left to him; he allows the input of others. Additionally, the way he says

“we” implies that that input from his trusted colleagues and employees is significant, rather than tangential. McDonough – at the request of and with the support of Rocky – was striving for the full integration of all of the departments on the business side with the hockey side, and the way he structured his organization allowed this to happen. In an interview, current Blackhawks Historian Bob Verdi marveled at this unique way of running a sports franchise: “The hockey side of the franchise attends the business meetings and the business side attends the hockey meetings” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). Going further, he explained that each side needs to understand the other in order to work well together; this way, if one side is asked to do something, they understand why they are being asked to do it (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). It seems quite obvious why an environment such as this would be constructive – communication and mutual understanding lead to better relationships, and this helps each side to align and accomplish their goals.

The results of this were astounding and impacted the success of the organization in each of the following seasons – the Blackhawks were able to do more and get more out of their athletes and their brand. The integration became an effective way to derive further value from the organization. For example, head coach Joel Quenneville sat down for a meeting with the Blackhawks’ advertising agency, Ogilvy and Mather, to “share his vision for the club’s style of play and lend insight into some of the team’s top players” (Botta). This type of open communication better allowed Ogilvy to derive a plan that captures the spirit of the team according to those closest to it. Additionally, close initial collaboration like this is likely to decrease the amount of drafts the agency submits before they settle on the one to be used for the season. In addition, the integration of both sides of the franchise creates more value for sponsors. The Blackhawks allow top sponsors to travel with the Blackhawks on every single

road trip, which is very rare for NHL teams, and, according to Terry Jenkins, president and CEO, USA of BMO Private Bank, an “experience beyond belief” (Botta).

In order for all of this to work smoothly, everyone has to be on the same page. Integration only works as well as communication. This is why the Blackhawks began “Blackhawks Daily”, which is an “in-house newsletter, [arriving] via email at 9 a.m. every weekday, providing updates on everything from team practice times and transactions to a list of groups attending the next game” (Botta). But the Blackhawks’ transparency doesn’t stop here. McDonough makes sure he knows why the team makes a move so that he can inform the rest of the staff – this way “everyone is on message when speaking with media, sponsors and fans at crucial moments” (Botta). This is very important since the size of the Blackhawks organization means that fans, media, and sponsors have many touch-points with the team – if any one of these touch-points is misinformed or pulling in the wrong direction, the organization is slightly pulled off course from its one goal.

It takes a special type of organization to accomplish this. It began with ownership support. McDonough believes that without complete backing from Rocky Wirtz, this type of integration would never have been possible, saying “We couldn’t do it at the Cubs. Everyone has their ways of doing things. You need ownership’s support, and Rocky was a big believer in it” (Botta). Rocky had immediately seen the value in a transparent rather than segmented organization, and believed fully in the new philosophy. Almost as important as ownership was the hockey side of the business. Both players and coaches were willing to let the business side in with their team. For example, Joel Quenneville was willing to meet with an advertising agency, and star players were willing to give up a weekend of their summer to attend the Blackhawks Convention - because they understood what it meant for the organization. It meant increased

value and it meant attracting fans, which in turn led to sold out arenas, which allowed for the team to pay players more and operate near the top of the salary cap, increasing their chance at a Stanley Cup (Botta). Players also were “treated like kings” by the organization, which made their efforts in marketing the team less of an invasion, and more of a part of the package (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). This was extremely important for the organization because it allowed business departments like marketing or new media to develop promotions involving players – something very attractive to fans – without worrying about whether or not the players would cooperate.

Creating this atmosphere was not always easy. According to McDonough: “Getting everyone on board went about as well as I could have hoped, but it didn’t happen overnight” (Botta). Those who didn’t “buy in” did not stick around, and new hires were specifically chosen to fit the mold of the organization. Those that did stay with the Blackhawks, however, were treated with great respect and trust that ran from the top of the organization to the bottom of the staff directory. The Blackhawks shared “privileged” information with them, such as the team’s plans for the trade deadline (Botta). While most teams refrain from this, fearing leaks, the Blackhawks chose to show great confidence in all of their staffers, and it paid off – not one person has ever shared this privileged information (Botta). It was a simple but effective phenomenon – the organization displayed trust and esteem in their employees, and their employees in return had great respect for and loyalty to the Blackhawks. This respect and trust also motivated employees to work harder for the Blackhawks and to work together to help the team succeed.

This collaboration and trust fostered an environment of innovation and creativity within the Blackhawks’ business departments. Mike Dorsh, accounting manager, said one of the most

distinct parts about working for the Blackhawks is that the Blackhawks' main goal is winning and getting people in the stands – they are not as bottom-line based, and if you have an idea that could drive engagement it won't be dismissed if it has no direct impact on ticket sales (Dorsch). Without the fear that constraints like a quick return on investment or uncooperative players will kill ideas before they have a chance to flush them out, employees are more likely to think outside the box and brainstorm new and different promotions or initiatives for the team. The Blackhawks also have a monthly meeting for everyone in the organization to share information and ideas (Botta). Since everyone is included and the Blackhawks make it a point to allow ideas from all of their employees, the staff feels as if the entire organization – including the hockey side – has their backs and is willing to support an idea, as long as it has value and it coincides with the direction of the organization. This environment of constant advancement and creativity has led to the successful “Blackhawks TV”, which is a fun and engaging Blackhawks channel on the website that delivers Blackhawks news and showcases player personalities through different video features. Blackhawks TV will be examined in depth later in the paper, but its innovative concept and unique insights into the players made it one of the first of its kind in the NHL (Kempenaar) and it exploded in popularity among fans.

The Blackhawks also worked to make it clear that winning was of the utmost importance. With young stars Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews tearing up the ice, they already had a head start, but with the unpredictability of player performance and health, it was still the responsibility of the front office to show fans just how serious they were about winning. This was most visibly manifested in the Blackhawks' new slogan: “One Goal”. The old slogan, “Red Rising,” was too reminiscent of the Blackhawks' previous seasons, in which management stood by the promise of “rebuilding” but with little actual results. McDonough thought the old slogan held no real

meaning and officially changed it before the 2008-09 season (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). While the “One Goal” marketing campaign will be examined in its entirety later on in the paper, it is important to note that the purpose of this new slogan was to state “the overall goal of the Blackhawks organization” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks, Ogilvy”). No longer did the Blackhawks expect fans to be okay with just trying or “rising”, they were explicitly stating that they had “One Goal” in mind as a business and as a team: to win the Stanley Cup.

The “One Goal” slogan was substantiated with further actions from the front office. Just four games into the 2008-09 season, the Blackhawks showed how little tolerance they had for losing when Head Coach Denis Savard was fired after the team had lost 3 of its first 4 games (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). General Manager Dale Tallon explained the difficult decision, saying it was due to the Blackhawks’ “flat” play, and that “we thought we needed to send a message and invigorate this team” (Boron, “Quenneville Welcomes”). The move, while harsh – especially on young player Patrick Kane – accomplished its goal. A message was sent to both the team and to the fans: we expect to win and we expect to do it now. Less dramatic, but just as powerful in communicating their new winning philosophy was the Blackhawks’ payroll. In the 2008-2009 season, the payroll increased by 48%, bringing them from near the bottom of the NHL to about the middle of the pack. The next season, the Blackhawks kept going, increasing their payroll to \$60,958,732, an 18% increase and 4<sup>th</sup> highest in the NHL (Exhibit 2). The Blackhawks continued in subsequent seasons to be near the top of the NHL in payroll. This sent the message to fans that the money they were paying the team was being invested in building the best team possible on the ice, all in the name of a Stanley Cup Championship. Fans no longer saw an organization that was more concerned with cutting costs than championships – they saw a

team that had one mission in mind – winning – and they finally were able to believe that it might just happen.

As this new integrated, forward-thinking, and championship-hungry management philosophy took hold in the organization, fans began to notice. They no longer looked at the Blackhawks as an organization unconcerned with how they were perceived in the public eye. They saw a united franchise, where the fans took a backseat to nothing in importance, least of all money. They saw executives that were willing to listen to their concerns, that were done making excuses, and that were going to spend money to put the best possible team on the ice. According to Blackhawks historian Bob Verdi, this was key in bringing the fans back. Referring to the new management, he pointed out that “everyone loves the players, but fans love the guys in suits too” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). Continuing, he believes that fans today trust the Blackhawks more than any other team in Chicago, due to the connection that the Blackhawks have forged with the fans (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). Fans were able to see into the inner workings of the Blackhawks; they saw the changing of the guard and the new philosophy that John McDonough and Rocky Wirtz had instilled and they approved wholeheartedly. The new value system provided the framework for every single initiative that the Blackhawks developed to win their fans back.

### **Televising Games**

At the top of the list of grievances Blackhawks fans had against previous ownership was the blackout of all home games from television. Therefore, this was one of the first issues that Rocky Wirtz set out to correct when he took charge of the organization. Rocky, not a man to make excuses, did not care that the season had already begun; he wanted to air as many home games as possible. Rocky met with Comcast SportsNet Chicago to discuss this, and soon the



station was on board, saying they “could broadcast one or two games” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). Unsatisfied, Rocky immediately requested more, and they finally settled on doing six games (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). While six games is not a full schedule, it did slightly increase exposure for the team, and more significantly, it indicated to fans that the organization was turning around and moving in the right direction. The six-game schedule was not due to a misguided fan philosophy this time; instead it was due to equipment constraints. Phil Bedella, general manager and vice president of Comcast SportsNet Chicago, said in an interview that they would have liked to fit as many games on air as possible, but issues arose with regards to acquiring the equipment and trucks necessary to air all of the games. The season had already started and they had already allocated their trucks, so challenges such as having a Bulls road game one day and a Blackhawks home game the next day prevented a full schedule from being aired (Bedella).

Rocky didn’t stop here. Though the equipment issues were something he could not control, he turned to something that he could control – acquiring sponsors for the extra broadcasts. He went through his old contacts from Wirtz Corporation’s liquor business, securing Diageo and Crown Imports (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). He also was instrumental in “convinc[ing] Chevrolet to sign on as the broadcast’s presenting partner” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). Both sides saw value in the deal, partly because of the way Rocky presented it. Mike Hillstrom, the president of Select Marketing Group, who made the buy for Chevy, attributed the deal to Rocky “being a great guy” and also being presented with a “great opportunity” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). Chevrolet saw this as a way to be associated with the positive vibes of bringing the Blackhawks back to the fans (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”), but to the Blackhawks, securing this sponsorship swiftly and being able to air home games meant so much more. Any

uncertainty or failures would be seen by fans as going back on their proverbial word – the fans were used to excuses from old management, they needed to see results. However, Rocky’s willingness to dig in to get the job done and his subsequent results showed fans that the team was moving forward – and soon there would be no fears they would ever turn back.

The decision to televise home games had an enormous impact on the Blackhawks. Jay Blunk, looking back on previous years, remarked: “Because [the Blackhawks] hadn’t been on television . . . the brand was totally irrelevant. An entire generation, maybe two, had no reference point to the Blackhawks” (Isaacson). Essentially, at the time, the Blackhawks had little or no place in the lives of the people of Chicago. The only mediums available to connect fans to the team were newspaper articles and road games – that is, unless they actually went to a game. Blunk’s solution to this was to “take the Blackhawks brand and ‘attach it to things with credibility’”, by making TV deals with Comcast SportsNet and WGN Radio to help reach “people that normally wouldn’t have sampled our product” (Isaacson). This exposure had multiple benefits. First, new fans were better able to find the Blackhawks on television due to deals with Comcast SportsNet Chicago and WGN. With a young and exciting team on the ice, the Hawks were bound to catch some attention as fans were drawn into the fast pace of the game. Additionally, as fans increasingly tuned in, more Blackhawks coverage would surely follow the demand.

Televised games also provided opportunities for new fans to connect with the game at their own pace. The old model of the organization had expected fans to jump right in and attend a home game. However, this is not how fans develop loyalties to a team. One of the goals of sport marketing is to move the fan up the “escalator of involvement” (LaFleur). Games on television allowed fans to sample the team, see the young stars, and ease back into the

organization. Additionally, the presence of broadcasters helped fans to learn more about the game they were watching. Replays from color analyst, Eddie Olczyk and his telestrator offered explanations of plays or calls, as well as rationale for certain decisions – such as to hold off from shooting, or to pull the goalie when down by two at the end of a game. Research has shown that understanding of the game is normally a necessary part of loyalty to a sport, and that knowledge effects participation and viewing habits (Sibanc). This is fairly obvious – if fans understand what they are watching, it is more meaningful to them and they derive more enjoyment out of it. Televised games can act as tutorials for new fans – the broadcasters give the play-by-play and slowly they learn more and more about the sport they are watching.

Even more personal connections are also forged during televised games. Broadcasters not only serve as sources of information, but also become the fans’ “voice” of the team. John McDonough was very familiar with the concept – he was able to build Cubs broadcasts around the voice of legendary Cubs broadcaster, Harry Caray (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). He understood the power of the connection between the television audience and the broadcasters that brought them their team. The Blackhawks already had this connection with Eddie Olczyk – who was well-respected by Hawks fans – but the team still had one big move to make. In June of 2008 the Blackhawks announced the return of fired broadcaster, Pat Foley – much to the appreciation of long-time fans (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Announce Return”). This move garnered plenty of positive PR – demonstrating to fans that the Blackhawks knew and cared about what was important to them. It also showed that this was a franchise willing to admit to and fix past mistakes and misunderstandings by bringing back important team personalities that had been pushed out of the fold. Not only this, but Foley’s enthusiastic and award-winning announcing style were sure to be an asset to television broadcasts as more fans

were introduced to the team. Foley's return was also symbolic of the Blackhawks' efforts to re-embrace tradition (Boron, "Blackhawks Welcome"). Long-time fans were able to appreciate the connection to the old-time hockey that they loved, while new fans were introduced to the sport via the man who had called the team for more than 25 years.

Fan connections did not stop with the broadcasters. Television was a medium through which fans were able to relate with players and to preview the atmosphere at the United Center. Television allowed fans to actually see the rising young team that the Blackhawks had put on the ice and to become familiar with the team. Anecdotes from announcers about different players enabled fans to learn more about their personalities and relate to them as people, not just as faceless athletes. The Blackhawks were also able to produce player and team features with the help of Comcast SportsNet. The marketing departments for both organizations work together to come up with story ideas and to promote the team (Bedella). These promotional efforts might include closer looks into the personal lives of players, or behind the scenes glances of the team at practice – footage that fans are interested in because of its exclusive nature, and because of how it showcases the players as people. The entities have a good relationship, and the Blackhawks are always proactive about making sure Comcast SportsNet has everything they need to air their games and features (Bedella). This great working relationship allows for the creation and utilization of a greater number of programming specials that help the fans to connect with the team. This would be continued further via marketing efforts and with the creation of Blackhawks TV, which will be discussed later.

Additionally, televised home games served as two-and-a-half hour advertisements for attending a game at the United Center; they were able to show that a Blackhawks game was no longer just a hockey game, it was an event. Bob Verdi described the live experience as

“tremendous”, saying that the pregame show at the United Center and the presentation itself is “worth the price of admission” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). However, fans would not have known this if the Blackhawks had not communicated it. Fortunately, the new management saw the value of their game presentation and live experience and integrated this into their first home telecast of the season. The game was against long-time Original Six rival, the Detroit Redwings, a strategic matchup that featured a traditional rivalry and a strong opponent (Chicago Blackhawks, “Comcast SportsNet”). The broadcast of the game was jam packed with value for the fans: “deliver[ing] the experience of what it’s like to be at a Blackhawk game at the United Center with live, on-site coverage during the pre and post-game show, locker room access and player interviews, on-ice/in-game player access, along with a number of additional in-game elements fans will certainly appreciate” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Comcast SportsNet”). Watching Blackhawks games gave fans a glimpse not only into the team, but also into the electricity that was beginning to take over the United Center.

The team essentially used the broadcasts to promote going to a game. Before every game, they made sure to show the Anthem – a unique Blackhawks tradition in which fans cheer through the entire song, nearly drowning out iconic singer Jim Cornelison when the stadium is packed (Bedella). They also worked with Comcast SportsNet to ensure that their second intermission promotion – Shoot the Puck – was televised, since they usually had a celebrity as one of the contestants. The goal was to show that the United Center was the place to be, even for celebrities (Bedella). It was about creating buzz for the Blackhawks. Fans that tuned in on television would see that the stands were filling up, they would see the electricity surrounding the pregame “Hit the Ice” video and the National Anthem, they would see the flashy young stars

making great plays, and they would see that high society – celebrities and other Chicago sports stars – were stopping by to check out the Blackhawks revolution.

A secondary benefit was fan socialization. Fans that had been previously ignorant of Blackhawks traditions were exposed to them while sitting in their living rooms. They learned quickly of the fan camaraderie forged from the Anthem cheer and the significance of Blackhawks greats like Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita from the Traditions video. This way, when they did finally go to the game, they already felt like a member of the Blackhawks Nation – they knew the tradition, knew some of the history, and knew the current team. The broadcasts essentially helped to streamline their initiation into the new Blackhawks fandom. Putting the games on television provided the exposure, but it was the Blackhawks’ strategic use of their newly-aired games that truly made the difference.

The Blackhawks’ new television policy also opened up new avenues for growth and value. There were now prospects for new revenue as sponsorship placement opportunities increased. Sponsorship options became more available with the emphasis on a new medium; there were increased slots for commercials, on-air mentions, and naming rights for plays were all offered as the Blackhawks switched their emphasis to television production. In addition, the Blackhawks instantly became a more attractive investment for sponsors. Televised games led to “more eyeballs” which is valuable to sponsors, who want as many people as possible to see their advertisements if they are going to invest in a team. According to Sara Bailey, sponsorship manager for Blackhawks, the increase in viewership has made it much easier for the Blackhawks to secure sponsors (Bailey). Companies caught on quickly – at the beginning of the 2008 season, already “19 new sponsors signed on, boosting sponsorship revenue by 40 percent” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). Just one year of making the effort to televise home games had convinced

fans to start paying attention to the Blackhawks, which in turn provided credibility and value for the team to offer prospective sponsors. It was a far cry from Bill Wirtz's premonition of television taking away from the bottom line – not only did television convince fans to come to the United Center, but it also drove sponsorship revenue.

Other extensions of televised home games were Blackhawks viewing parties and Blackhawks Bars. As the Blackhawks gained popularity, bars began picking up on the hype as well. Sport is a pastime best enjoyed in groups. As fans multiplied, they began to congregate in bars to watch games, enjoying the camaraderie of other fans, standing and rooting in solidarity for the mighty Blackhawks. Bars started hosting viewing parties (Balde) which built excitement among fans and also drew in new fans that wanted to be a part of the buzz. The Blackhawks also hosted official “Road Watch” parties, when the Blackhawks were away from the United Center. However, to keep the home game vibe, they provided the bars with official Blackhawks footage to create the “Home Game Experience”; this included “intermission contests, [and] chances to win tickets to future Blackhawks games”, as well as “team highlight videos” and “goal lights, songs, and celebrations” (“Chicago Blackhawks Official”). Fans were able to experience the game with fellow Blackhawks fans, as well as feel the atmosphere of a home game – all officially sponsored by the Blackhawks.

Additionally, the Blackhawks created the “Official Blackhawks Bars” program. This program features over 100 Blackhawks Bars throughout the Chicagoland area, a list of which can be found on the website's “Fan Zone” dropdown menu. Described as “team-approved locations that are specifically set up for viewing every minute of every Hawks game – home and away – and are designed for you, the fan” (“Official Blackhawks Bars”), these bars allow for further fan socialization, connection, and engagement surrounding the Blackhawks brand. Phil Bedella also

points to the program as a way to reach the 18-49 young male audience that they are always trying to capture with their telecasts (Bedella). The Blackhawks were able to turn a simple telecast – finally able to be viewed from a fan’s living room – into an incredibly valuable social opportunity for the organization and for fans.

When Rocky Wirtz stepped into the Blackhawks organization, he knew airing home games was a necessary step to the Blackhawks redemption. This move led to the increased exposure of the Chicago Blackhawks among sports fans, and served as a peace offering to long-time fans who were frustrated with the direction of the organization. However, it was the subsequent steps that the Blackhawks took with regards to television that truly made the difference in bringing fans into the fold so quickly. They advertised the electric atmosphere of home games, socialized their new fans in the traditions of the team, and created a buzz around the team that fans in Chicago couldn’t ignore. As fans were drawn in, the sponsors followed, and revenue increased dramatically. The Blackhawks continued to move forward with this, realizing that the pack mentality of sports fans would make viewing parties and official team bars a popular place to be for fans.

The revolution was in full swing. TV ratings for road games before the change in management were abysmal – around a .4 household rating per game (Bedella). However, by the end 2008-2009 season, the Blackhawks finished with an average household rating per game of 1.26, an over 100% increase from the already improved .63 rating from the partially-aired previous season (Comcast SportsNet Chicago, “Blackhawks on Comcast”). The next season the ratings continued to soar, averaging a 2.44 household season average, an increase of 94% (Comcast SportsNet Chicago, “Blackhawks on CSN”). This has magnified the effect of every marketing and branding effort for the Blackhawks – more fans are paying attention, more fans



want to be a part of the team, and more fans are willing to participate in anything the Blackhawks decide to produce. This is extremely valuable for sponsors, who now not only are getting “more eyeballs” from fans, but they are getting engagement and participation from extremely passionate fans who respond eagerly to any initiative that is associated with their favorite team. These incredible numbers are also encouraging for the Blackhawks, who are still working diligently to ensure that they do not allow themselves to be complacent and instead work to constantly engage and stimulate their fanbase to engender strong loyalty for the team.

### **Changes to the Team**

The summer of 2007 was an exciting one for the team itself, drafting Patrick Kane first overall and signing Jonathan Toews to an NHL deal. Additionally, young defensive pair Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook were rapidly rising, providing a solid defensive presence behind the flashy teenage stars (Garcia). Other key players, Patrick Sharp, Nikolai Khabibulin, and Tuomo Ruutu rounded out the team, and for the first time in a long while, there was hope about the product the Blackhawks had put out on the ice. Though at first, the team’s early 5-6 record didn’t show it, anyone watching the Hawks had already noticed a change in their play and in the buzz surrounding the team (Rosen). Just one month into the 2007-08 season “the Hawks [had] already come from behind more times than last season and have outscored their opponents in the final period” (Wittenberg, “Hawks Rising”). It was the kids bringing the team back. Coach Dennis Savard called Kane the team’s “best player” with Toews right behind him (Rosen). At first, it wasn’t so much that the team was winning every game; it was about the way they were playing. There was a new tempo to the game, a new excitement emanating from the ice that had not been there before. “The feeling we’re getting in Chicago is they’re seeing young kids that are going to be fun to watch for a long time” (Rosen). The Blackhawks were bringing back the

entertainment value in the great sport of hockey – they just needed the energy of their young team to transfer to energy in the stands.

Team chemistry was a large part of this energy. Kane and Toews fit in quickly with the team, and their energy was “contagious” for their teammates (Wittenberg, “Baker’s Dozen”). Additionally, Coach Denis Savard attributed the newfound on-ice consistency to the team’s chemistry, which had allowed them to come from behind or hold onto one-goal games (Wittenberg, “Baker’s Dozen”). The chemistry on the ice was crafted from the players’ off-ice friendships. They were constantly teasing and joking with each other, keeping the locker room light. For example, James Wisniewski would joke about he and his teammates forming a book club, calling out certain guys, who would shoot comments right back, making the entire locker room laugh (Chicago Blackhawks, “Wisniewski Proves”). A lot of the behind the scenes features that the Hawks provided for their fans also showcased this. As fans saw how much their team was a bunch of “regular guys” just “having fun” and playing the game they loved, they were better able to relate to them. This kind of light atmosphere was also undoubtedly a healthy environment for young players like Kane and Toews to learn the ropes of the NHL and to form friendships with their teammates – having fun and doing their job at the same time. The seamless way in which the players got along off the ice translated to their play on the ice, which was just as energetic and smooth as their banter in the locker room. Chemistry was an intangible but certainly present benefit that impacted the Chicago Blackhawks as they rose to the top of the NHL.

The decision to televise games and the re-emergence of exciting play in Chicago worked in tandem to bring the fans back to the team. The exciting play would likely have gone unnoticed by most of the city if the Blackhawks had continued their policy of blacking out home

games. Undoubtedly some interest would have been generated, as fans naturally flock to a winning team, but the Blackhawks didn't even break back into the playoffs until 2009, almost two years after the young team took the ice. Also, without the new television policy, the revolution would not have been as sweeping, and likely fans would still have been quite frustrated that they could not watch every game the rising team played.

Additionally, televising games would not have been nearly as successful if the Blackhawks were not playing well. When the Blackhawks began airing home games, they provided extras and special features for fans to increase the entertainment value of the broadcast, as well as to teach them more about the team and increase their investment in the Chicago Blackhawks. Fans responded to these features, but likely would not have been as interested in them if they did not enjoy what they were watching in the first place. Getting an inside glimpse into the life of Patrick Kane loses value if fans watching see that he's hurting the team rather than helping them. Fortunately, fans tuning in saw an inside glimpse into 18-year-old phenom and October Rookie of the Month, Patrick Kane, who was stunning viewers by attaining more points in his first month than any other rookie since 1992-93 (NHL, "Kane Named"). To add to the attraction, he was scoring these goals against his childhood idols, and doing it all with a goofy smile on his face with his mouth guard hanging out. The kids were fun to watch, the team was playing with energy and enthusiasm, and finally, the Blackhawks were showing the city of Chicago what was going on within the walls of the United Center.

The 2007-08 season was successful, even if the Blackhawks did not make the playoffs. The organization had re-introduced their team to the city of Chicago, and the players had reminded the city what it was like to watch an exciting hockey team. At the end of the season, Patrick Kane was awarded the Calder Cup, as the NHL rookie of the year, and Toews was one of

the three finalists (Kuc, “Kane Scores”). That summer, the Blackhawks signed speedy veteran defenseman Brian Campbell, an acquisition that had fans clamoring for the next season to start (Ballantini). For the first time in years, fans were confident in their team’s playoff chances. The Blackhawks were showing them just how serious they were about acquiring talent and winning, and fans were responding enthusiastically. The excitement was palpable, the expectations were high, and the Blackhawks rose to meet them. By mid-season, the Blackhawks had set a franchise record, recording nine straight victories (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Set Franchise”). Blackhawks players also made up half of the starting roster for the Western Conference all-star team, with Toews, Kane, and Campbell all voted in as starters (Kimelman). The season culminated in a playoff berth, their first since 2002 (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Earn First”). The Blackhawks won their first two playoff series against the Calgary Flames and Vancouver Canucks 4-2, but lost the Western Conference Semifinals to the Detroit Redwings by a series score of 4-1 (“2008/2009 Playoff”). The fans did not consider the loss a disappointment, but rather, saw the entire playoff experience as an encouraging sign for the next year.

By this time, the entire city was behind the Chicago Blackhawks. A winning record, a playoff berth, and an exciting team left everyone wanting to be associated with them. The Sears Tower illuminated its antennas red every night throughout the playoffs in support of the Blackhawks (“Blackhawks Get An Assist”). The Chicago Field Museum dressed their famous dinosaurs in Blackhawks sweaters (Field Museum), while the Shedd Aquarium dressed its divers in Blackhawks jerseys for each dive presentation on playoff game days (Shedd Aquarium). The tides had turned, as this time it was already established Chicago brands and organizations making efforts to be associated with the surging Blackhawks. These large gestures of support served to further increase the buzz surrounding the Hawks. Now, a person could not walk

around Chicago without being exposed to the Blackhawks logo. The Blackhawks were taking over the city.

The Hawks' resurgence was in full bloom by the end of the 2008-09 season. Fans were back and they couldn't stop talking about the Blackhawks. The buzz continued as the Blackhawks signed star winger Marian Hossa to a 12 year deal, further bolstering their powerful roster ("Blackhawks Sign Hossa"). As it turned out, Hossa was the last piece they needed. In 2010, just the third season since the Blackhawks' change in management, the Blackhawks hoisted the Stanley Cup for the first time since 1961 (Klein). It was the culmination of the on-ice resurgence, and the achievement of the "One Goal" that Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough had promised the fans at the opening of the 2008-09 season. However, while a championship certainly was bound to attract fans to Chicago's once-forgotten hockey team, what happened in Chicago was not simply a comeback, but a revolution. As I will explain next, it was much more than a winning record that turned the franchise into one of the most respected, successful, and popular organizations in all of professional sports.

### **Marketing Revolution**

When most fans thought back to the glory days of the Chicago Blackhawks, they reminisced about the "roar" of the stands in Chicago Stadium. However, "the myth was that those 18,000 that filled the stadium every game were the only Hawks fans in Chicago – and they only showed their pride when they were safely in the United Center" (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). There was never a large presence outside of the United Center – on game night, fans shook the "Madhouse on Madison", but when the Hawks weren't playing, the buzz was not there. This was not exclusive to the Blackhawks – for many years much of the NHL lacked any sustained marketing practices that created year-round hype for the team throughout the city. The

Blackhawks fanbase was strong and loyal – but outside marketing efforts were not integrated well with the success of the team.

When Chicago Stadium was torn down and the Hawks started performing poorly on the ice, the “roar” in the stands began to dissipate. Half of the games were not televised, the Blackhawks had to pay to keep their games on radio station 670 The Score (Dorfman), and there was no lingering presence throughout the city. The Blackhawks brand lost relevance amongst the other teams in Chicago – teams that were, for the most part, performing equally poorly (Rosenbloom, “Fans Started It”), yet had a greater presence in the city. As the Blackhawks worked to reinvent themselves internally and develop a presence on the Chicago sports television landscape, the next step was to revolutionize the Blackhawks brand with a new fan-centered marketing strategy.

Re-branding the Blackhawks started internally, with Rocky Wirtz’s entrance, the hiring of John McDonough, and the swift moves that these two executives made to change the direction of the organization and put the home games on television. Now, the Blackhawks looked outside their organization – looking to make the Blackhawks brand credible again via partnerships. As stated previously, the contract with WGN Radio was the first step in this process – it reached new audiences and also convinced sponsors that “it was safe to come back and invest radio and TV dollars” (Isaacson). WGN Radio was the home of the Chicago Cubs, and therefore the Blackhawks would be able to reach prospective fans that were already interested in sports, but that had not been exposed to the Blackhawks. It also just sent a message to fans that the Blackhawks were now “worth it” – a large radio provider was willing to carry their games now, so maybe there really was something brewing at the United Center.

As more fans were exposed to the Blackhawks via television and radio partnerships, the Blackhawks began to use the hype to position themselves as the new “cool” thing. They were young, flashy, and successful – if they believed it, soon so would the city of Chicago. The “One Goal” campaign was the beginning of this. The very slogan of the organization told fans ‘we are ready to win and win now’, and was present on every Blackhawks-related advertisement. Every time a fan saw the Blackhawks logo, it was accompanied by the “One Goal” slogan, which helped to enforce this association between the Blackhawks and hunger for a Stanley Cup. Additionally, the Blackhawks sought to make their players celebrities in Chicago. They started the 2008-09 season off with a Red Carpet Event. All of the players arrived to the game in individual limousines, high-fiving fans on their way into the United Center; meanwhile, Eddie Olczyk announced the event as “master of ceremonies”, and the event featured appearances from alumni, the mascot, and the ice crew (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Launch Home Opener”). The Blackhawks weren’t just sitting back and letting fans spread the hype, they themselves were creating it. They were essentially telling fans that they were a big deal, that their players were stars deserving of red carpet treatment. They didn’t just create an event, they created a destination – and an image of the team as the next “big thing” in Chicago. Soon, people wanted to be associated with the new brand they had created – the Blackhawks were young, they were ready to win, and that’s what Chicago was looking for.

Yet another part of this new entertainment strategy was implemented via the Blackhawks’ game production techniques. Though the Blackhawks could not necessarily control the team’s on ice performance, every other aspect of a fan’s experience at the United Center was in their control, and they made sure to add considerable value through their game atmosphere. Prior to the game, fans can relive every great moment in Blackhawks history with 21,000 of their

closest (and madly cheering) friends with the “Orchard” video, a stirring three-minute blast from the past cut with animations of the famous Indian head logo being stitched on the sweater. Then, the pregame show introducing the team involves a laser light show on the ice, coordinated to the “Hit The Ice” opening video on the United Center jumbotron – captivating a blacked out United Center. To paraphrase Bob Verdi, the pregame show and the presentation itself is worth the price of admission – hockey with the Blackhawks is more than a tremendous spectator sport, it’s an event (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). The Blackhawks turned everything they did into a destination event, this time producing game experiences that added entertainment value to fans and causing the spread of positive word of mouth.

The Blackhawks’ strategy here was to create buzz around their team. They had new management, they had a young team, they had just burst onto the television scene, and now they wanted to branch out further through the city. The goal was “to make the Chicago Blackhawks part of mainstream Chicago. So if Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews and Dustin Byfuglien are walking down Michigan Avenue, they would be recognized” (Isaacson). This required a fully integrated marketing plan, spreading the Blackhawks’ presence throughout the city of Chicago. The Blackhawks were off to a good start, putting games on TV and radio, reaching out to Chicago bars, and re-developing their slogan, but John McDonough knew that more needed to be done. He not only wanted a presence all over the city, he wanted a presence at all times, 365 days a year (Rozenblat). He saw the offseason not as a time to rest, but as a time to continue to remind fans about the Chicago Blackhawks. He wanted the Blackhawks to take over the city of Chicago every single day of the year.

### **365 Day Marketing Strategy**

Retaining a strong presence throughout the entire year is difficult, especially in a city like Chicago. During the Blackhawks offseason, fans have many options. First, both the Chicago



Cubs and the Chicago White Sox were in the middle of their seasons, meaning there was a home baseball game almost every night. There are also other entertainment possibilities such as theater, music, sight-seeing, street festivals, etcetera – Chicago is rich with leisure time options during the summer months. Fans would not naturally yearn for or seek out hockey – the Blackhawks once again had to step in and create buzz for their team. Therefore, in order to stay relevant, the Blackhawks decided to run advertisements and air commercials year round. They also made it a point to generate news and press releases throughout the offseason (Kuc, Chris. Personal Interview). This meant that Chicago fans were still exposed to the Blackhawks brand throughout the summer, and news media also continued to cover the team even in the offseason.

### *Chicago Baseball Partnerships*

In yet another strategic partnership, the Blackhawks reached out to the summer competition in the form of the two baseball teams in the city: the White Sox and the Cubs. In attaching themselves to “established brands” like the White Sox and Cubs (Isaacson), the Blackhawks were again reaching fans who were already interested in sports – they were not wasting marketing or sponsorship dollars on people outside the target market. Similar to their previous partnerships, this move contributed to the Blackhawks’ relevance and credibility. Since the Hawks had become a joke to much of Chicago, they had to convince fans that they were the “real deal”. By reaching out to the city through already established and beloved sports teams, they were able to connect their athletes to the sports stars across town. The aim was to convince fans that if you like Chicago baseball, you might want to check out the new Chicago hockey team that’s trying to come back.

The partnerships with the Chicago White Sox and Cubs contributed greatly to the 365 day marketing strategy. The Blackhawks received signage at the ballpark, as well as promotional opportunities such as the “chance to pass out a Blackhawks pocket schedule at a

Cubs game and the chance to air a commercial during the sixth inning of every White Sox game” (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). These season long promotions ensured that any fan that visited either Wrigley Field or U.S. Cellular Field would be exposed to the Blackhawks, extending their presence throughout the year. The Blackhawks then sought to increase engagement by connecting their team to these teams’ traditions, such as throwing out the first pitch for the White Sox, or signing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” in the seventh-inning stretch at Wrigley (Isaacson). Therefore, the Blackhawks were not just a tangential promotion at the ballpark; they were being honored by being part of significant aspects of the games and the team traditions.

The White Sox partnership even included nights specifically dedicated to the Chicago Blackhawks. Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough appeared at the game and spoke during the broadcast. White Sox broadcasters “Ken Harrelson and Darrin Jackson called the game from the centerfield ‘Fan Deck,’ and both were wearing a customized Blackhawks hockey jersey, hat and hockey gloves at the start of the broadcast” (qtd. in “Come Together”). This meant that not only fans that were at the game, but also fans that were watching the game on TV, were being exposed to the Chicago Blackhawks. The nights also featured “a pregame party and parade for Blackhawks season-ticket-holders, visits by Blackhawks players and legends . . . and a rare mid-week post-game fireworks show” (“White Sox Host”). The mission was to generate excitement for the upcoming Blackhawks season, and according to the players in attendance, they succeeded. Jack Skille commented: “It’s awesome. Just being around the Chicago fans is a good feeling. The city is coming around and the fans are excited” (Boron, “Sox Give”). These partnerships served not only to increase awareness of the rise of hockey in Chicago, but also to generate excitement about the upcoming season for the Blackhawks. Additionally, prospective or new fans that attended or watched the Blackhawks-themed games would not only be exposed

to the Blackhawks logo and players, but also to the fans that had already flocked around the team and the electricity and hype they were creating.

### ***Blackhawks Convention***

The most significant example of the Blackhawks commitment to 365 day marketing was the creation of Blackhawks Convention – a three-day long gathering of fans, players, alumni, and broadcasters to generate excitement and connect fans to the team. John McDonough had created sport fan conventions during his tenure with the Chicago Cubs (Howe), and therefore was well-versed in the art of organizing such an event. The inaugural Blackhawks Convention was advertised to feature the following:

Autograph and photo sessions with current and former Blackhawks; Q&A sessions with current and former Blackhawks, Business and Hockey Management, and Broadcasters; Coaches and Hockey Operations Staff detailing their strategy for bringing the Stanley Cup to Chicago; exhibits and interactive games; [and] a live HawkCast (podcast) taping. (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention Sold”)

Hosted at the Hilton Chicago, hotel rooms sold out in 24 hours and the 10,000 available tickets were gone in under two weeks (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention Sold”). It was clear that the Blackhawks had a grasp on what the fans wanted. The purpose of the Convention in terms of the year-round marketing strategy was to throw a large event for the Blackhawks in the middle of the offseason. It allowed fans to meet and connect with players and to become engrossed in the Blackhawks for an entire weekend – all without watching any hockey.

I attended the Blackhawks Convention as a fan for the first three years of its existence, and then as a researcher/observer in the summer of 2012. As a fan, I certainly enjoyed myself, and as a researcher, I was incredibly intrigued and amazed at the planning and organization. The following analysis of the Blackhawks Convention comes from my own experiences and

observations of the Blackhawks Convention, as well as from Convention previews and recaps posted by the Chicago Blackhawks.

The overall atmosphere at Blackhawks Convention is one of complete emersion into the team, with an air of exclusivity and access that begins with the fan adorning his or her pass. Fans do not present tickets to gain access into the venue, they wear passes that look strikingly similar to VIP passes around their neck. The passes are a nice keepsake, as well as a great place to get an autograph when one meets a player or personality. Then, throughout the hotel, there are different sections and exhibits, each completely decorated in the Blackhawks theme. Fans walking in are greeted with an information booth, where they receive special “scratch and win” cards for further access to special perks such as meet and greets. From here, fans can proceed to the autograph, photo, and vendor section; the interactive exhibits; or the Q&A and panel room.

The Convention begins like the season does – with a large and hyped up Opening Ceremony. Eddie Olczyk, the master of ceremonies, introduces every player, and each are greeted with the roar of excited fans packed into the venue. During the 2008 Inaugural Convention, the Blackhawks made the most out of this platform, using the moment to announce the appointment of Jonathan Toews as the youngest captain in team history (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention A Hit”). The team also gave a nod to tradition, announcing the retirement of number 3 in honor of Keith Magnuson and Pierre Pilote (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention A Hit”). Effortlessly they combined the new and the old, welcoming new fans and their new captain, while thanking long-time fans and Blackhawks legends. The Convention was also well-timed to immediately follow the exciting news that the Blackhawks would be playing at Wrigley Field that season for the NHL’s Winter Classic (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention A Hit”). Fans in attendance were fortunate

enough to be present for some of the most defining moments in the Blackhawks' history, and with the Blackhawks' elaborate presentation, it was certain that they knew just how big of a moment this was. This helped fans feel special – as if the organization truly valued them. It also gave them something to talk about, and with all of the buzz surrounding the ceremonies and the following Convention, people around Chicago were starting to feel like they might be missing out on something if they didn't tune in.

As for the Convention itself, each of the events or features provided by the team served a purpose in engaging or pleasing fans. The autograph and photo sessions allowed fans to connect with their favorite players on a personal level. Fans would get to take home one-of-a-kind souvenirs to remember their weekend and their bond with the team. Meeting the players in person establishes a much deeper connection than that forged via watching the players on the ice, and allows for deeper engagement and involvement with the team. The Blackhawks also effectively used line management techniques to ensure that fans enjoyed the Convention as much as possible. While the first year of the Convention featured long and sometimes disorganized autograph lines, the Blackhawks learned quickly, and in subsequent years gave fans wristbands to help organize the chaos and allow fans to experience more of the Convention. If a fan had a wristband, instead of waiting in line the entire day, he or she could peruse the exhibits or see a player panel and then come back when it was time for the line to begin. The Blackhawks also set up televisions to entertain fans waiting in line. Fans were able to watch the best plays from the past season, highlights from Blackhawks legends, team features that had been produced throughout the year, coach and player interviews, and clips from the popular Blackhawks TV. Fans were able to learn about the team, catch any moments they might have missed throughout the season, and enjoy a few laughs alongside the players. These classic line management

techniques ensured fan satisfaction, and then the experience was finished off with an unforgettable meeting with one of their favorite athletes.

Q&A sessions and themed panels also allowed fans to get to know players and coaches. They showcased the players' personalities to connect with fans – often panels featured several players who would play off of each other as they interacted with fans, relaxing and having fun, much to the amusement of the crowds. For example, in the Kids Only Q&A session, Kris Versteeg – who, through a recent interview, had come to be known for his rapping ability – was asked to rap a verse from Fergie's Glamorous. At the urging of his teammates, he did a small performance, much to the delight of the crowd. Children and parents alike thought he was hilarious, and likely left the session as bigger Versteeg fans than they had been when they arrived. Other sessions featured young stars Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews talking about being the young guys on the team, and about how they had been pranked by teammates. This was a follow up to a Blackhawks TV feature about the two pranksters on the team, Patrick Sharp and Adam Burish, targeting Toews and Kane for some good-natured fun. Through these sessions, fans were able to see the human side of the players, and see how charismatic and personable they were. Fans who were a part of these sessions found it hard not to like – and subsequently support – this group of nice and affable athletes. These were names that fans wouldn't mind wearing on their backs. The Blackhawks had set up an opportunity for fans to get to know these players – to see that they weren't inaccessible, rich, and aloof athletes caught up in the spotlight, but actually friendly, funny, and talented young kids that were happy playing for the fans of Chicago. Sessions such as these would not have been possible without a group of classy and fun players representing the team; but the Blackhawks recognized the opportunity,

and they put their players in the best position imaginable to show the world what kind of team they were selling.

The entertainment value of their players was certainly something well-utilized by the Blackhawks organization. In 2008, they partnered with Second City of Chicago for a comedy-improvisation act featuring players Adam Burish and Brent Seabrook (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention A Hit”). Helped along by experienced improv performers, Burish and Seabrook acted out skits, unafraid to appear a little silly in front of the fans. This was a hit with fans; they enjoyed seeing two players willing to put themselves out there for the amusement of the crowd. The Blackhawks were branching out with this association with Chicago comedy, and fans were starting to see them as more than just a hockey team, but as an entertainment option in which to invest themselves. The Blackhawks then added a Convention after party, where fans were once again able to get to know the players as both athletes and as entertainers. Karaoke turned out to be a big hit, featuring Patrick Kane singing and dancing – a dance later named the “Kaner Shuffle” – and Kris Versteeg serenading the crowd with his rendition of “Sweet Caroline”. With these “performances” the Blackhawks were quickly becoming stars in the eyes of many fans – they weren’t just athletes, they were celebrities. They were charming, fun to be around, and they let the fans join in on their party. The Blackhawks were creating more than a fanbase; they were creating a big family, where fans truly felt connected to the players and a part of the team.

The third part of the Convention featured the exhibit room – here fans could take a trip down memory lane and view trophies from past triumphs or old game-used equipment from throughout the years. Frank Pellico, the Blackhawks organist, was situated here, playing game-night music and interacting with fans. It is also here that fans could become a part of

Blackhawks hockey and try out numerous games and simulations. With hockey movies and highlights playing around the room, fans could test their skills in shooting accuracy or in a floor hockey game. Sometimes, players would stop by and show off their skills alongside fans in these very exhibits, meeting and connecting with all of the people that had welcomed hockey back to Chicago. There was also a locker room replica, available for photo ops, so that fans can immerse themselves in a behind-the-scenes aspect of their team. These exhibits increase interest and engagement with the sport of hockey itself. As stated earlier, the more fans understand about the game, the more involved they can become. Fans that might not have been familiar with the sport of hockey before they discovered the Blackhawks were able to feel what it's like to hold a hockey stick and take a slap shot. They were able to experience hockey in a different way, and these new and positive experiences were all associated with the Blackhawks, helping to create and retain fan loyalty for years to come.

All of the hype and buzz created each year during the Blackhawks Convention gave the Blackhawks a true presence in Chicago during the summer months. NHL clubs also started to notice – 15 representatives from other teams were present at the inaugural event alone, taking down observations to possibly apply to their own teams (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Convention A Hit”). The response that the Blackhawks had received from fans was amazing, certainly enough to keep hockey alive even in July. The Blackhawks also did not allow the limited amount of tickets available for the Convention constrain the impact of the event. On their website, they provided live coverage of the Opening Ceremonies and many of the sessions, as well as detailed recaps with pictures and stories for all fans that were not able to make it. Even fans that were not there were excited when they got new behind the scenes footage of their favorite players, or funny specials that the Blackhawks had produced specially for the



Convention. The significant amount of buzz and news generated from the Blackhawks' well-designed fan weekend lasted weeks afterwards, and left fans looking forward to the beginning of the next season. Fortunately, year-round updates, website content, advertisements, and baseball partnerships helped fans get through the next two months and kept the Blackhawks fresh in their minds after experiencing the Convention.

### *Training Camp Festival*

As the offseason drew to a close in September, the Blackhawks realized the importance of starting off strong. While the Convention kept hockey alive even in July, they knew they needed something else to ensure that the season began with as much fanfare as possible. Therefore, they started in the pre-season, hosting the Blackhawks' first ever Training Camp Festival before the 2008-09 season. According to Ashley Hinton, the Blackhawks' Community Relations Manager, the Training Camp Festival was created to be a street festival modeled off of what many NFL teams do at the start of the season to get their fans excited (Hinton). It was a part of the 365 day marketing strategy, and also gave fans the opportunity to experience the United Center in a game atmosphere (Hinton). This was a much less expensive way for fans to check out the team live at the United Center. In its first year, it was like a preview for fans to see what going to a game might be like; in the following years, as the Blackhawks sold out every game, it was a chance for fans that weren't lucky enough to get tickets to still connect and engage with their team.

The Blackhawks announced that the inaugural festival would take place on September 20, 2008 and would "offer our great fans an unprecedented look at the intensity of a live NHL training camp" (Chicago Blackhawks, "Blackhawks Announce First-Ever"). The festival offered multiple opportunities for fan involvement. Fans could get close to the team, watching scrimmages and previewing the young players that might make the Blackhawks roster, or they

could test out their own skills with a 3-on-3 street hockey tournament. Additionally, the Blackhawks got creative, starting the event off with the “5K Mad Dash to Madison”, in which fans could choose to run, walk, or even inline skate (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Announce First-Ever”). The Mad Dash to Madison also had the benefit of reaching new crowds of people, as it attracted many different runners who might not be Blackhawks fans, but that might stick around after the race to experience the Blackhawks (Kuc, Chris. Personal Interview). Throughout the festival, there are many other activities for all fans, as well as live music, and the scrimmages are narrated by Blackhawks coaches and players so that fans get a truly rare and informative look at the inside of their team (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Announce First-Ever”). At the second annual festival, Blackhawks alumni also made appearances, and the first 1000 kids in attendance received an autograph from a current player (“Blackhawks To Hold”). This was especially important as the Blackhawks worked to engage fans when they were young, increasing the possibility that they would grow up with the Blackhawks as a part of their life and continue to cheer them on for years to come.

By understanding that fans wanted to be invited to get an inside look at their team and providing ample opportunities for all fans to engage with the Blackhawks, the organization was able to garner excitement for the upcoming season throughout the offseason. John McDonough wanted to ensure that the Blackhawks were never far from fans’ minds, and by carefully planning the release of news and interesting website content, as well as by providing unforgettable experiences throughout the summer months, the Blackhawks were able to go from 365 day irrelevance to year-round relevance.

### **Creating an Atmosphere of Accessibility**

A theme seen in many of the promotions and events discussed so far is the accessibility of the team. Fans – new to the sport, or long familiar with the Blackhawks – were given ample

opportunities to connect with the organization, either in person at various events, or virtually via website content, television programming, and Blackhawks TV features. According to Jay Blunk this accessibility was a key component of the Blackhawks' plan to win back the city of Chicago: "Because of what happened here before, we're always going to have to make this franchise more accessible, and our players are going to have to always do more in the community, more speaking engagements and do more interviews than other teams in town" (Isaacson). By letting fans into the organization, the Blackhawks were no longer perceived as a cheap and removed franchise, but as a welcoming team, focused on serving their fans. The Blackhawks also worked to transform their players from athletes to personalities, giving fans a human side to relate to and to become attached to. This allowed people that were not originally hockey fans to find a way to relate to the team even if they didn't completely understand the game and were still easing into it. The players themselves were instrumental in the success of this strategy; they had the right personalities for reaching out to fans, and didn't mind putting in the extra effort to connect with them. Accessibility became one of the core components of the Blackhawks' marketing strategy, which presented true value to fans in the form of behind-the-scenes features and unique experiences.

Once accessibility was established as a priority, it was essential that the players were willing and able to be involved. Young stars Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews were stellar players, but did they have the right personalities for this type of marketing strategy? Blackhawks management quickly found out that yes, they had the perfect personalities. First, the players were willing to do the extra legwork to connect with fans and convince them to come back. Bob Verdi believes that this all goes back to the well-integrated hockey and business sides of the franchise. The players did a lot to promote the team, but they understood why they were doing

it. Plus, the players were treated “like kings” by both the organization and the fans, so it is not so much of an inconvenience as it was part of their job (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). The players understood that their efforts were the reason the team was able to sell out every night and remain a cap team. In addition, they received the adoration of fans and were treated like celebrities; when put up against the alternative (no outside commitments but no fans) they were very willing to contribute. Additionally, the players had the right personas. They were not “Hollywood” or unapproachable. They acted like blue collar guys: down-to-earth, likeable, and funny. They had the sense of humor to do sillier interviews or participate in commercials that showcased their personal characteristics, rather than their hockey ability. They were the perfect team to present to the fans of Chicago. However, the true significance of the Blackhawks’ new accessibility approach was that the organization recognized what kind of players they had, got them on board with their ideas, and then executed their marketing plan flawlessly.

The Blackhawks’ “One Goal” campaign was developed with player accessibility in mind. The mission was twofold. As discussed earlier, it was meant to assure fans that the Blackhawks were on their way to a Stanley Cup. Additionally, Jay Blunk stated that the other objective was “to showcase the personalities of our players” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks, Ogilvy”). The campaign included several television commercials, designed to “capture the new spirit of the Blackhawks and highlight our interesting and diverse personalities” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks, Ogilvy”). Fans watching these TV spots saw a darkened arena, with a player – in full gear sans helmet – skating up to a solitary microphone under a spotlight, and declaring their “One Goal” of the season (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks, Ogilvy”). The players did not wear helmets so that fans could put a “human face” to the athletes (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks, Ogilvy”), yet they were still dressed in full gear to show off the mighty

Blackhawks logo and keep the game of hockey central in the ads. Additionally, the “goals” of the players were consistent with the “One Goal” of the organization, yet still distinct to their personalities. For example, hard-hitting defenseman Brent Seabrook stated: “My goal: To kill ever penalty” while crushing a hockey puck in a gloved hand (Chicago Blackhawks: One Goal – Brent). Another spot featured Patrick Sharp and Kris Versteeg skating up together in sunglasses. Together, they state: “Our goal: Is to light the lamp” – the Blackhawks goal horn then goes off, and the players skate away, smiling and laughing (Chicago Blackhawks: One Goal - Sharp). Both spots showcase the players by their playing style – Seabrook is a tough player and therefore crushes a puck – and by their personalities – Sharp and Versteeg wear sunglasses as the two funny guys on the team, but also as two great goal scorers. Fans were able to learn more about the players just from watching the spots, but also see how likeable and “human” they were. These types of spots opened up the door to further access to the team.

The Blackhawks also arranged for multiple marketing appearances for their players around Chicagoland, bringing the players into the community and increasing the Blackhawks’ presence throughout the city. The first large appearance occurred in December of 2007, when Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews appeared at HawkQuarters, the Blackhawks merchandise store on Michigan Avenue (Chicago Blackhawks, “Kane, Toews Signing”). The appearance was an immense success – 2,500 fans showed up to meet the two young players, who were already considered celebrities in their eyes (Burnside). That’s 2,500 fans that had an unforgettable experience, meeting the two new rookies who were predicted to bring the Blackhawks back to prominence in the hockey world. Plus, the large line flowing down Michigan Avenue filled with Blackhawks jerseys surely garnered some attention from the many people in Chicago that still weren’t aware of what was brewing on the city’s west side. The players themselves were

surprised with the incredibly enthusiastic fan response they received, and marveled over the “red carpet treatment” they were already experiencing (Burnside) – treatment that they would also be sure to remember the next time they were asked to make an appearance. Fans also were able to meet the brains behind their new organization. John McDonough stayed out in the cold to talk to fans in line (Burnside), showing just how much the Blackhawks cared about what they were doing.

At about the same time, Jonathan Toews, Brent Seabrook, Patrick Kane, and Adam Burish were making visits to ice rinks in the Chicago suburbs, reaching out to young hockey players and assisting with practices (Chicago Blackhawks, “Toews, Seabrook”; Chicago Blackhawks, “Kane, Burish”). These visits were essential for the Blackhawks. Meeting youth hockey players and their families helped the Blackhawks make an impact on these young fans that were already involved in the sport and more likely to want to become involved with the Blackhawks as well. It was the perfect occasion for the kids to meet their heroes and it presented an opportunity for sparking fan engagement at an early age that will sustain and develop as the kids grow up.

The Blackhawks’ commitment to youth hockey was essential to developing fans at a young age, promoting the sport of hockey at the youth level and providing access to the team to aid in their growth within the sport. Prior to the management changes, Bill Wirtz was already well-respected for his involvement with youth hockey (Isaacson, Hirsley, and Janega); however, participation and potential for the sport were constrained by the lethargy that surrounded the Blackhawks in Chicago. When the Blackhawks were re-developing and staffing the new front office, the position of Director of Youth Hockey was created to oversee the official Blackhawks Youth Hockey program that was starting to form (Camins). As the popularity of the Blackhawks

rose, so too would the programs offered to young children who were being captivated by teenage sensations Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane. Annie Camins, the Director of Youth Hockey, says the newly-developed program worked to “bridge the relationship between the team and everyone involved in youth hockey: players, parents, general managers, coaches, instructors, rink owners, and rink volunteers” (Camins). By engaging the entire hockey community, the youth hockey program reached the maximum amount of people and provided a complete and supportive environment to connect kids to the sport of hockey and the Chicago Blackhawks. Programming was developed to get people involved in hockey, to engage them in the sport, and to support them (Camins).

The Blackhawks created and partnered with various youth hockey initiatives. The Rink Partnership program, for example, was started by Bill Wirtz and has grown from ten to seventy teams. However, what started as a kind of “barter agreement” – in which rinks received tickets and the Blackhawks received fans – has turned into a more balanced relationship. According to Camins, one of her department’s first moves was to go to these rinks and say, “We’re back. What can we do for you?” The Blackhawks provided these rinks with promotional items, decals, stickers, and tickets, trying to bring them into the fold for a more lasting relationship with the team (Camins). This small action had a large impact. Kids now were wearing Blackhawks gear as they played; it helped them to forge a deeper connection between the activity that they loved and the Blackhawks. Also, by reaching out and extending them these gifts, it showed how much the organization cared, and that they were willing to work with the programs to help them develop.

Other youth hockey programs included “Youth Hockey Incubators” – which were meant to introduce kids to hockey and the Chicago Blackhawks with the hope that they would become

lifetime fans. The idea here was that even twenty years down the road, programs and experiences like this could still have an impact, as these kids grow and influence their friends to try new things (Camins). Additionally, recognizing that hockey is expensive, the Blackhawks offered the “Learn to Skate” program, loaning equipment and introducing participants to the game of hockey – and also to a Blackhawks game at the United Center (Camins). Once again, the goal was to introduce people to the sport and help them to overcome barriers to participation – it was all about accessibility and opening the team up to the city. The Blackhawks sensed hesitancy from fans with regards to affordability, and they addressed it immediately. Even if a fan found that financially they cannot sustain this type of involvement in the sport, they have seen all the positives that hockey has to offer and experienced the electricity of the United Center. This experience and connection was likely to stay with them. Also, by giving fans a Blackhawks jersey for participation, they keep something tangible to always remind them of the team. Street Hawks, another program, worked in much the same way, reaching out to inner city children to help them gain interest in the Blackhawks via a street hockey program. Centered on learning and affordability, it spread positivity about the Blackhawks and increased the chance of these kids continuing to follow the team as they grew older.

The Blackhawks also took measures to reinvent their hockey schools and realign them with the team, giving participants increased access to the franchise itself. According to Camins, they had originally outsourced the planning and organization to an outside agency, so their first move was to bring the program in house. This allowed them to put their own name on it – and they had just the right one in mind: Eddie Olczyk. By naming Eddie as instructor, kids were naturally drawn to the program just via name recognition. This was followed up by Eddie’s rapport with the kids and his abundance of hockey knowledge. The program is rotational –



going to different rinks throughout the summer. The mascot, Tommy Hawk, as well as various players would stop by to participate, giving the program added value and giving the kids unparalleled access to their favorite hockey stars (Camins). This program served to increase engagement with the team among the entire hockey community, and the participation of big names gave the program legitimacy and also communicated to fans how committed the Blackhawks were to their youth programs. Additionally, it contributed to the 365 day marketing philosophy as it took place throughout the summer – though the team was not on the ice at the United Center, they were on the ice with the kids. It provided good material for summer press releases or news stories about the Blackhawks' involvement with the community, and it ensured that the Blackhawks were never far from the minds of the hockey community even when they were not in season.

The Blackhawks went far to ensure affordability and quality in their youth hockey programs. While at first it may sound like simply an opportunity to attract good will and positive press, the Blackhawks saw the benefits in maintaining strong youth programs. As discussed earlier, youth programs provided an avenue for kids to become exposed to the sport of hockey and to the Chicago Blackhawks as a team. Kids that play the game and understand it – and find it fun – are more likely to enjoy watching the game as well. By introducing kids to the sport, the Blackhawks were cultivating new fans at an early age and connecting them to the team to increase their engagement and loyalty to the organization. It also related to the Blackhawks' refusal to accept complacency. Camins and her team were well aware that in five years the team could have a losing season, which could turn into another five losing seasons. Fans that are not engaged with the team and the sport are more likely to stop watching if this happens. However, fans that feel a true connection to the team – for example, a connection forged via fun childhood

experiences learning to shoot from Eddie Olczyk – are much more likely to stick with their team because they see value in places other than just on-ice performance.

In addition to youth hockey appearances, the Blackhawks organization scheduled players to show up at other community locations and popular Chicago events throughout the year. Duncan Keith appeared at Meijer for a special cooking workshop called “Cooking with the Blackhawks” (“Keith, Meijer”), while Brian Campbell appeared at the Taste of Chicago to sign autographs for fans (“Brian Campbell To Appear”). Both of these appearances exposed new fans to the Chicago Blackhawks and helped to forge new connections. Fans were able to see a different side of Duncan Keith and got to engage with Brian Campbell on a one-to-one basis. Especially at an popular event like the Taste of Chicago, hundreds of thousands of prospective fans were able to see the crowds that showed up just to meet Brian Campbell – who at the time, was an exciting new addition for the Blackhawks – and witness the hype that was starting to build throughout the city.

Soon, every initiative the Blackhawks launched had an element of accessibility. Events such as the Blackhawks Convention and Training Camp Festival among others were developed and planned to increase fans’ accessibility to the players. The Convention featured a weekend in which the entire team stayed at the same hotel as the fans and interacted with them in various capacities. It offered a unique experience for fans to see players off the ice, to get pictures and autographs, and to participate in player panels and sessions. Fans couldn’t ask for a closer way to experience their team. The training camp festival offered a rare look into the hockey side of the organization – fans not only got to watch practice and preview the young players arriving at training camp, but practice was narrated for them and they got a true inside glance at their thought process. In fact, Jay Blunk described the festival as “one more step in making the

Blackhawks organization accessible to our fans” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Announce First-Ever”). The Blackhawks were well on their way to opening up each part of their organization to the city. They even invited fans to watch the Rockford Ice Hogs – their AHL affiliate – in their preseason team scrimmages. This Red/White Event drew a “passionate” crowd, and featured stars from the current Blackhawks roster as well as players trying to make the Blackhawks roster in the coming season (Boron, “Toews, Makarov”). Then, as discussed previously, the Blackhawks hosted Red Carpet season openers, and fans lined the streets to greet their team as they walked into the United Center to start the season. Next, the cameras got involved. In 2008, the Blackhawks announced the launch of Blackhawks TV (Chicago Blackhawks, “Blackhawks Launch New”) – and soon, a camera was filming everything, from unique and fun player interviews to the players’ antics in their hotel rooms. Blackhawks TV, and its effects on the Blackhawks’ popularity, will be covered in its entirety later in this paper.

Once the full accessibility strategy was put in place, nothing about the Blackhawks was hidden from the fans, and the fans responded. They felt special and valued by the organization because they were allowed access to the team. The connections they formed with the players and the franchise were vital as the Blackhawks worked continuously to satisfy their new fanbase.

### **Understanding the Fans**

As the Blackhawks worked furiously to increase their presence in the city of Chicago, the fans took notice and responded enthusiastically. In the 2007-08 season, the Blackhawks “saw double-digit increases in reported attendance,” with a 32.1% increase on the year (Mickle, Ourand, and Karp). It only took this one transitional season for the Blackhawks to overtake the entire league in attendance – every year from the 2008-09 season onward, the Blackhawks consistently sold out the United Center every night (Ecker). Season ticket sales exploded as well. As of the end of the 2008-09 season, the “season ticket base [had] grown from 3,400 to

14,000 – with a waiting list of 4,000” (Vardi, “The Greatest”), an enormous change in just two years. Leading the league with consistent sell outs was a welcome change for the once-dismal Blackhawks, but the organization refused to slow down –this was an organization that did not settle for complacency. The Blackhawks had not gotten to this point by accident, and they certainly weren’t going to stay there forever from just momentum alone. The key was their approach to their fans and the efforts they took to understand what fans wanted from the team. It was a strategy that took them to the top, and a strategy that they would continue to follow.

The Blackhawks were able to give the fans what they desired because they took the time to understand their fans. They knew that organizational transparency and player accessibility were valued by many sports fans, and they worked hard to establish this as a priority for their franchise. Additionally, they made efforts to connect with their fans and ask them what they thought their next steps as an organization would be. This resulted in Fan’s Voice – a fan-to-fan surveying program. Every game night, fan volunteers were stationed around the United Center, surveying fans in the crowd on anything related to the Blackhawks or the United Center. The theme for the survey changed every night, and ranged anywhere from concession quality to game entertainment (DiLenardi). The benefits were multiple. The Blackhawks received thousands of fan responses every night, providing invaluable insight into the opinions of each guest that visited the United Center. It started an organizational precedent for ongoing market research, and fit well with the Blackhawks’ forward-thinking strategy. The Blackhawks used their crowds as samples – it presented the perfect opportunity, since their audience was already in the vicinity and they had no logistical or financial problems trying to reach them. The fans also already had their minds on hockey, and were more likely to remember their experience while they were still at the arena. The results were immediate, only requiring data entry, since the surveys were

conducted in-house, on one night only per subject. Additionally, the Blackhawks found an inexpensive way to implement this: using fan volunteers. Not only did this cut costs, but it also furthered fan engagement with those fans that contributed. Fans that volunteered for the team were likely to feel a more in-depth connection to the Blackhawks, while fans that participated saw how valued they were. Not only were the Blackhawks taking the time to ask their opinion, but they were allowing fans into their organization as ambassadors, which clearly required trust and respect.

The Blackhawks also began conducting multiple focus groups throughout the year. Each usually featured a different topic, such as game operations or social media presence (DiLenardi; Kempenaar). The Blackhawks Convention had its own tailored focus groups – and over the years the Blackhawks have implemented several fan suggestions like providing programs to read while waiting in line, and erecting nameplates for players at panels or other sessions (DiLenardi). The focus groups showed how much the Blackhawks listened to their fans – and fans that saw the improvements also saw how much they were valued by the organization. The information gathered at these focus groups was presented to the franchise, analyzed, and implemented for later seasons (DiLenardi). John McDonough took every little detail seriously, and it showed. When I interviewed Bob Verdi, he described McDonough’s relationship to fans as “almost freaky”, saying that if a fan told McDonough that he didn’t like his hot dog, he believes the next day, “John would launch into an investigation on the quality of hot dogs at the United Center” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). For the Blackhawks, no detail was too small, because every small detail had the ability to influence fan perception, and it was all of these small details that came together to make the entire Blackhawks experience.

Season ticket retention was also treated as a priority for the Blackhawks. Dan Rozenblat, the Senior Director of Ticket Sales and Service, recognized that if the Blackhawks could go from 3,400 holders to 14,600, they could also go in the opposite direction (Rozenblat). This was the responsibility of the entire organization, but was specifically undertaken by the ticket sales and service department. The name of the department itself – including “service” in the job title – set a precedent for one of the values of the organization: retaining fan loyalty via excellent service. Season ticket holders each were given their own customer service representative that worked to make sure that they were happy (Howe). This was the embodiment of the organizational philosophy of never allowing for complacency. Conversely, the Miami Heat cut their entire ticketing staff when their popularity skyrocketed; the Blackhawks will not do this because they believe in working hard to continue to encourage fans to increase their engagement with the team or to renew as season ticket holders (Howe).

This strategy has worked well for the team, which has posed a 99% season ticket holder renewal rate for the past 4 years (DiLenardi). This number is not only impressive from a service standpoint, but it also contributes to cost reduction. It is much less expensive to keep fans engaged with the team than it is to court new business and convince them to invest in season tickets. The Blackhawks also realize that though it is certainly a positive that their tickets are in high demand, it can also pose a problem, specifically with expanding franchise’s reach. According to Steve DiLenardi, they now cannot offer their full or partial plans to the masses, and there is a large wait list which can make it more challenging to attract new fans (DiLenardi). This is where the Blackhawks’ other events help them. There are many opportunities for fans to connect with their team outside of a game atmosphere; even fans that cannot get tickets to see a

game live can go to official Blackhawks Bars or attend the Training Camp Festival to see their favorite players in action.

The Blackhawks revolutionized their entire marketing philosophy. They re-positioned their brand, they created value in their offering, and then they communicated this value to their fans. They attached themselves to established brands and beloved teams – reaching out to sports fans and asking them to come back and check out what was happening at the United Center. They created a presence throughout the city, throughout the year. The offseason was not a time to rest, it was a time to continue to promote hockey. They created events that drew in hype and that generated buzz around the team. They opened up their organization and their team to the city of Chicago. They created unique experiences that fans would always remember, that forged very human and very real connections to the young players on the roster. They created an organization that radiated class and style, success and winning. The Blackhawks had a new image – and it was an image that fans wanted to be associated with.

### **Respect for Tradition**

One of the most distinct attributes of the Chicago Blackhawks franchise was their long and storied history. As an Original Six team, the Blackhawks represented the beginning of the NHL – the team and the logo were some of hockey's greatest symbols. Additionally, with over 80 years as an organization, the Blackhawks themselves had rich history and traditions that fans were proud to remember and celebrate. Sadly, this was diminished during the late 1990's and early 2000's, as the team played for a half empty stadium with little success. For example, in the glory days of Chicago Stadium, Blackhawks fans famously drowned out the national anthem with their cheers, loud enough to shake the Madhouse on Madison. The anthem tradition started in 1985 during the Campbell Conference Finals against the Edmonton Oilers, when an energized

crowd pumped up their team – which was down in the series 0-2 – by cheering through the entire song, drowning out singer Wayne Messmer (Strauss). The tradition stuck when the Hawks went on to win the next two games; says Messmer, “it was so emotionally stirring that people wanted to keep it going” (Strauss). The ritual then gained national prominence during the 1991 All-Star game, when fans raucously drowned out the anthem, waving supportive messages for US troops that had gone off to fight in the Persian Gulf War (Strauss). The tradition was interwoven with patriotism, and the unity and solidarity that fans felt when they participated was something that helped forge a certain bond with the Blackhawks.

However, by 2006, the New York Times reported that the tradition was “fading away”, and that “some fans still try to carry on the tradition, but they are often hushed by others” (Caldwell). The Blackhawks certainly felt the effects of the loss of a unifying tradition as attendance decreased and apathy increased. Additionally, the disappearing anthem allowed fans to forget the roar that the crowd was once famous for, and the pride they once carried as Blackhawks fans. However, just as much as the quieting anthem was a sign of the team’s decline, it soon became a signal of their rise. Die-hard supporters had still fought to keep the tradition alive – enough so that fans that started coming to the games or that watched on television would begin to notice. As more fans started to come to the United Center and experience the energy and goose bumps the tradition produced, the “roar” started to return.

The Blackhawks aided this along. Telecasts were scheduled to feature the anthem, so that fans at home could learn about the tradition and see the electricity that it generated (Bedella). Additionally, singer Jim Cornelison and organist Frank Pellico were treated as figures just as important as the players themselves. At every game, when the anthem was announced, they also announced who it was performed by. Jim Cornelison soon became a familiar face for



anyone viewing Blackhawks telecasts. Also, at the Blackhawks Convention, Frank Pellico would be stationed alongside the exhibits, posing for pictures with fans, regaling them with stories of his years with the Blackhawks, and playing his now-famous organ music. When fans saw how highly valued this tradition was by the organization itself, they bought into it very quickly. The fans finally had an organization they could trust and a team they wanted to be associated with, so naturally team-endorsed traditions like the anthem were quickly adopted. Then, once the fans truly experienced the anthem when they came to a game at the United Center, they realized just how powerful of a feeling it produced, and these emotions and the camaraderie that came with them increased their positive feelings for the Chicago Blackhawks. Fans loved the tradition, loved being a part of the comeback, and eagerly took part in the roar, which became a Blackhawks rallying cry.

Additionally, the previous Blackhawks organization had broken relationships with many of their most beloved players such as Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita. Each time fans were reminded of amazing moments from the past, they were also inevitably reminded of the feud between Bobby Hull and the Blackhawks, or of the tendency of the front office to let their best players go in order to save costs. Chicago Tribune writer John Knowles wrote that the Blackhawks' 2003-04 "tradition" video "rings kind of hollow, especially in a half-empty arena with a bunch of players named Igor and Burke shuffling through another no-playoff season" (Knowles). What had once been one of the most valuable aspects of the Blackhawks organization had become either lost to the past, or too painful to remember; the Blackhawks needed to find a way to bring back their tradition and pride again.

When John McDonough arrived at the Blackhawks, he immediately set a precedent for valuing history. He set out to truly learn about the franchise's tradition, and also made concerted

efforts to reach out and repair the fractured relationships. He contacted Chicago Tribune writer, Bob Verdi, because he wanted to “pick his brain” about why so many of the Blackhawks legends had left the team on bad terms. He wanted to repair these relationships and “saw a great importance in bringing them back”, believing that “to respect the past is to have a future” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). The Blackhawks were no longer going to be content to hold grudges or to allow their traditions to slip away. It was time to bring back the “roar” and a key step in doing this was to remember what that roar really meant. According to Adam Kempenaar, the Blackhawks were ready to “start over” – they would embrace the legacy of the team, while forgetting the feuds of the past. No names would be dragged through the muck – they would do things the right way, welcoming both players and fans back to the team (Kempenaar). In doing this, the Blackhawks showed the true class of the franchise, reintroducing the city to team legends and creating an environment in which these Hall of Famers felt proud to come back to the team that they had always loved.

Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough recognized that the Blackhawks’ alumni deserved a meaningful presence in the current franchise. One of John McDonough’s first steps in this regard was to bring back the biggest legends in Blackhawks history – Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita. Not only were these two of the greatest players to ever wear a Blackhawks sweater, but to bring Bobby Hull back into the fold after all of these years of bad blood was a statement about the way the team was ready to turn around. When McDonough originally reached out to Hull, he was angry, and expressed everything that frustrated him about the organization and the way he felt he had been treated. However, Hull “saw something different in the new ownership and management” that convinced him to reconsider (Mickle, “Turnaround Teams”). Stan Mikita had also noticed the changes happening in Chicago, and was actually waiting for the call from

McDonough (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). In December of 2007, the Blackhawks officially announced the return of both Hull and Mikita into the Blackhawks family – naming them “official Blackhawks ambassadors” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Hull, Mikita”). The role of these ambassadors was to “represent the Blackhawks at events at the United Center and throughout the Chicagoland area” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Hull, Mikita”). The Blackhawks were ensuring that their history was an essential part of the organizational comeback – showing new fans not only the young stars that were beginning to tear up the ice, but also the old legends that had graced the ice years earlier and that would forever be a part of Blackhawks legacy.

The Blackhawks invited many of their greatest players to come back, later reaching out to Tony Esposito, Pierre Pilote, and Jim Pappin, among many others. The ambassadors spanned every generation of Blackhawks hockey, reaching fans of all ages, and becoming a clear indicator of just how much the franchise now valued the players that made it great. Additionally, the alumni were integrated into nearly every aspect of the franchise. Most notably, large ceremonies were scheduled to welcome back key players like Hull, Mikita, Esposito, and the MPH Line (Pit Martin, Jim Pappin, and Dennis Hull). The announcement of the joint Hull and Mikita ceremony aimed to “honor their monumental achievements and have a new generation of Blackhawks fans embrace the rich history they represent” (Chicago Blackhawks, “Mikita, Hull To Be”). Comcast SportsNet and the Blackhawks worked together to air the ceremony in its entirety, including “exclusive one-on-one interviews with Mikita and Hull”, “live coverage of the anthem”, and “live coverage of the United Center feed of the Blackhawks introduction video ‘The Orchard’” (“CSN Announces”). This ensured that the ceremony reached the largest audience possible. Anyone that was tuning into the Blackhawks after hearing the buzz they were

creating was also introduced to the Blackhawks' traditions and exposed to the great history of the team.

Furthermore, fans in attendance – even those who did not understand the significance of these legends – saw their highlights on the video board and heard the ovations of the crowd when they were introduced. For example, the crowd erupted when Tony Esposito donned his signature goalie mask (Coffey). Inevitably, all fans could sense that this was an important moment, and were able to see just how much these players meant to the team. These moments had all fans joining in, and also wanting to learn more, just so that they could understand too. The Blackhawks also provided special throwback programs featuring the honorees of the night, providing memories for die-hard fans and a history lesson for newer fans. They ensured that these programs were made with quality – more likely to be kept as collectibles than left under the seat after the game. Like many of the other initiatives the Blackhawks had started, the ceremonies also had celebrity feel, with the Hall of Famers walking down a red carpet on the ice and waving to cheering fans. The Blackhawks made that not only were Kane and Toews treated like rock stars, but so were Hull, Mikita, and Esposito. The efforts convinced fans, who soon were cheering just as loud for Bobby Hull when he was flashed on the video board during an intermission as they were for Jonathan Toews during player introductions.

The Blackhawks' efforts at live events were bolstered by the presence of their Blackhawks Ambassador program around the city. Blackhawks greats did autograph signings just like Toews and Kane did. They were featured in panels at the Blackhawks Convention, in the spotlight just as much as the “young guns”. Some of these panels were ingeniously integrated to include both the young stars and the legends. It built a bridge between the glory days of old and the new rising team. The history of the team also gave certain credibility to the

young stars, showing they were a part of a larger legacy; and the young stars lent an enthusiasm and buzz to the memories of the Hall of Famers. Remembering Hull and Mikita reminded Blackhawks fans of what they once were, and seeing Toews and Kane showed them what they could become. NHL.com's Phil Coffey saw the Blackhawks' dedication to their history as an indication of their bright future, saying that by bringing back these stars, the "package is becoming complete" (Coffey). These efforts were further developed on the website, with Bob Verdi – as Blackhawks Historian – regularly writing features about the history of the team. Columns like "The Verdict" featured stories from both the present and the past, once again, showing the equal value the Blackhawks put on every era of their franchise.

Not only did this show tremendous respect for what these players contributed to the team and the city, but it also finally integrated one of the franchise's greatest assets into its marketing plan. So many teams lacked the kind of history that instilled great pride and evoked powerful memories – yet as an Original Six team that had suited up some of the greatest legends in the game, the Blackhawks had always had this on their side. Unfortunately, by allowing money and grudges to get in the way, this asset had long been ignored. Rocky and McDonough were finally focused on developing the Blackhawks' storied history to its full potential, using these ceremonies and features to teach the fans the importance of respecting the history of the team. They would no longer allow the organization to develop fan relationships and loyalties to current players only – they instead focused their efforts on melding the old with the new, the strong but forgotten legacy with the unproven yet promising youth. It was a transition of generations – those that remembered Hull and Mikita were drawn to check out Toews and Kane – and those that were falling in love with Toews and Kane were taught the magnificence of Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita. The Blackhawks made it essential for fans to know both sides.

For fans, as the team's buzz grew, knowledge was power. "True fans" were those that recognized and valued both the traditional and the modern. The Blackhawks made it "cool" to know the tradition of the franchise – not knowing who Bobby Hull was, was just as grievous an offense as not knowing how to pronounce "Toews". This was important because it helped fans understand just who the Blackhawks were. They were an organization with strong history and pride – an organization that had gone off track, but that had such a compelling legacy that it was their duty to continue. Embracing tradition and history was imperative to constructing the present. As the Blackhawks were able to connect fans with the history of the franchise, the team began to mean more to them, they felt a connection to the roots of the organization, and wanted to be a part of bringing the organization back to greatness. The Blackhawks worked hard to ensure that they were not to be perceived as simply a new and trendy fad – viral for a year but then lost to the next "big thing". They emphasized their long history and roots, and therefore, their rightful place in the Chicago sports landscape.

### **The Winter Classic**

As each of these new philosophies and marketing initiatives were undertaken by the Blackhawks, the city of Chicago began to respond, once again seeing value in the up-and-coming Blackhawks. However, John McDonough was still looking for that one impetus that would bring the Blackhawks to the next level – the national stage. In the 2007-08 season, the NHL decided to host the first outdoor hockey game in since 2003 (Carchidi) – a New Year's Day matchup between the Pittsburgh Penguins and the Buffalo Sabres. Taking hockey back to its roots as an outdoor pond-hockey game – the way many of the game's biggest stars first grew to love the sport – and marketed as a once-a-year destination event, the NHL Winter Classic was born. McDonough watched the inaugural Winter Classic – which had over 70,000 fans in attendance

and an unprecedented 2.6 television rating (Zelkovich and McGran) – and immediately decided that he wanted the next one to be in Chicago (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). Never one to let an opportunity slide by, McDonough “gave it the full court press” using Wrigley Field as his main selling point (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). He realized just how important this kind of attention could be for the Blackhawks and after a key meeting NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, the Blackhawks beat out the New York Rangers as the hosts of the January 1, 2009 Winter Classic (Vardi, “Chicago’s Comeback”). This move was crucial for the Blackhawks, who finally had leadership in place that was able to recognize opportunities and capitalize on them, finding ways to attract and engage fans.

The Winter Classic provided a stimulus for driving the sale of season tickets. Fans had seen one season of re-energized hockey and promising management policies, but the Winter Classic, when it was announced, became the Blackhawks’ “coming out party” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). An event of this magnitude was enough to “put the franchise on the front burner” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview), greatly increasing demand for Blackhawks tickets. Everyone seemed to want to be at this historic event. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman – recognizing that Wrigley Field only seats 41,000 – advised fans who wanted tickets: “The best way, and at this time the demand has been great, is I would strongly encourage [fans who want to attend the game] to be full-season ticket holders. That’s the fastest way to ensure them attending this game” (qtd. in “Mighty Wind”). So, not only was the event itself bringing recognition and excitement back to the sport for one day, but its effects impacted the entire season. Guaranteed attendance was a strong incentive for fans to become season ticket holders, which was a prime goal for the Blackhawks. With a large season ticket base, the Blackhawks could put more effort into retaining fans, which was less costly than attracting new fans. It would also be beneficial to

sell out the United Center early on in the season, giving the franchise more capital to build its team and its program. McDonough “credits the Classic with selling an extra 5,000 season tickets” (Van Riper). This was an enormous amount of gate revenue and cost savings.

Additionally, sold out games increased the amount the Blackhawks could charge for sponsorship, and also increased the impact of traditions like the anthem, with larger crowds taking part and creating an electric atmosphere. The anticipation of the Winter Classic was enough to drive interest, engagement, and sales, accelerating the Blackhawks’ return to prominence.

The Winter Classic was a perfect fit for the resurging Blackhawks, and the Blackhawks were a great choice for the league’s newest event. The NHL reserves the Classic for “old school matchups and rivalries”, and limits the event to “making strong markets even stronger” (Van Riper). The Blackhawks and the Red Wings are an Original Six rivalry, and both markets fit the profile: Detroit already had an established fanbase, while Chicago was a very large sport market, needing an opportunity to make the Blackhawks an integral part of the market. The Blackhawks’ newfound emphasis on tradition and alumni was also consistent with the goals of the Classic. The Blackhawks were getting in touch with their roots, bringing back ambassadors and educating the fans about their tradition and history; the Winter Classic was about getting in touch with the NHL’s roots, showcasing players from yesteryears alongside modern stars, in a setting reminiscent of many young hockey players’ first years with the sport. Additionally, players wore specially made “retro” jerseys – a collectible for fans and a connection to the past (“Hawks and Wings”). Hosting the game at historic Wrigley Field served to round out the emphasis on cherishing tradition. The ivy walls were recognized nationwide and were engrained in Chicago’s history. To connect Blackhawks and NHL traditions with the legacy of Wrigley Field was the perfect formula for success.



The central theme of tradition, along with the efforts of the NHL to preserve the timeless feel of the Winter Classic and turn it into a yearly destination event, served as the perfect catalyst for the Blackhawks to leap back into the spotlight in Chicago. The Blackhawks were convincing fans to return with their authenticity. This was a young team with new management, but they had 80 years of history and tradition – and greatness – to stand up on. They didn't have to create their place in Chicago, they just had to reclaim it. The Winter Classic's genuine and old-school tone helped to further solidify this with Hawks fans. The Blackhawks were able to show that they were not the newest trend that would die off in a year or so – they were a large part of the fabric that first weaved the NHL, and the Winter Classic allowed fans to see just how important the team was to the sport and the city.

Wrigley Field was also an important detail, as it extended the partnership with the Chicago Cubs, further establishing the Blackhawks as an organization on par with arguably Chicago's most iconic team. Fans were able to see that the Blackhawks were legitimate organization, with pride and tradition, and they began to want to be associated with them. The pregame honoring of the alumni also buttressed the Blackhawks' new alumni ambassador program. Fans tuning into Winter Classic coverage would have been exposed to these legends in some capacity, and therefore to the way that these players were clearly valued by the sport. It helped to further connect these Hall of Fame players with their role in the organization now, and also served as a treat for older fans who longed to see them on the ice again. Finally, the retro jerseys were an important way for the Blackhawks to further connect with history, but also to increase merchandise sales and spark purchases for new fans. As fans flocked to the team, buying a jersey was an essential step to increased engagement. By revealing a special jersey – to be forever associated with a historic outdoor game – the Blackhawks gave fans an opportunity to

connect with the history that the franchise was currently making. It served as a shortcut to becoming more of an “insider” with the team – fans jumping on the bandwagon could sport a retro jersey proudly, as it was not only already woven in the great tradition of the team, but also a symbol of the Winter Classic and of the concurrent resurgence.

### **Online Presence and New Media Trailblazing**

The Blackhawks also benefitted from the increase in consumer consumption of online and digital content that was occurring simultaneously with their organizational resurgence. The organization recognized this trend and worked hard to become a leader in this new channel. Not only did they provide unique and valuable content to their growing fanbase, but they also integrated their efforts to complement their larger marketing strategy, pairing digital initiatives with game promotions, events, and player appearances. This section will examine the Blackhawks’ utilization of social media and online platforms to connect and engage with fans, and the creation, development, and integration of Blackhawks TV.

### **Website and Social Media Strategy**

As the Blackhawks began to resurrect their presence in the city of Chicago, a strong website was necessary to engage the growing fanbase that wanted to learn more about their newest obsession. The Blackhawks were partially prepared for this even before the resurgence, regularly producing content such as “Wiedeman’s Travels” and “One Minute Remaining in the Period” to be featured on the website. “Weideman’s Travels” was a well-written blog done by radio broadcaster John Wiedeman as he traveled with the team and provided a unique perspective into the lives of the players. “One Minute Remaining” was written by Harvey Wittenburg, and served as an all-inclusive recurring column for fans, covering every topic imaginable, from the team’s history to their chances for success in the future.

These articles were a step in the right direction with regards to fan engagement, and certainly set a good foundation for the expanded features that came into fruition once the Blackhawks started concentrating on marketing to fans. General news about the team was available through several media outlets, such as ESPN, NHL.com, or newspapers like the Chicago Sun Times or the Chicago Tribune. However, behind-the-scenes features and nostalgic memoirs of past performances were not normally provided by other media outlets. By providing them on the website – giving fans the chance to see what it’s like to travel with the team or to remember the emotions they went through as a child when they watched Tony Esposito’s amazing saves – the Blackhawks were providing something unique and valuable to the small fanbase that they had. This differentiated the Blackhawks website from other news websites, and could have helped to encourage site traffic and engagement since this was the only place to read these types of features. Additionally, these stories were not just the hard news, they were the emotional and entertaining bits – much more enjoyable and easy to read than game recaps, and much more suited to appeal to casual fans. While at the time, these casual fans were not likely to want to check out the website or a game due to the Blackhawks low profile in the city, it established a solid baseline for further content to engage fans as the internet continued to explode and as fans started to come back to the team.

When Rocky Wirtz and John McDonough took the reins in the Blackhawks organization, everything began to come together in a sort of perfect storm for the team. There were two young and flashy players reinvigorating the team’s play on the ice, the games were finally aired on TV – showcasing the players and also attaining the goodwill of long frustrated fans – and the organization had new leadership and new marketing practices in place to support the changes. The website represented yet another tool that would help to transform the Blackhawks. Unlike

other aspects of the organization, the Blackhawks' website was already well-suited to accommodate these new droves of fans, providing information on the team and providing extras for fans that wanted to learn even more. However, the Blackhawks kept to their philosophy of constant innovation – not satisfied with the basic but valuable features for fans, they endeavored to continue to develop the website and to create new content to keep the fans interested.

The Blackhawks recognized the value of their feature articles as inexpensive and easily developed content that still increased fan interest in and engagement with the team. They added to these articles by inviting Bob Verdi to work for the team as a historian. Verdi now writes two columns for the team – The Verdict and Between the Dots. Combining storytelling by a talented writer with scoops on a team that fans were starting to want to learn more about, these columns were perfect additions to the library of content on the Blackhawks' website. One of the most interesting aspects of these columns was the fusion of tradition and history with the modern day revolution. For example, the first "The Verdict" concentrated on defenseman – past and present. It connected Bob Murray, who "played more games for the Blackhawks than any other defenseman in franchise history" (Verdi, "Murray Knows"), to the Blackhawks' current star defensive pair, Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook. Verdi seamlessly weaved the current team with greats of the past, transferring the respect that new fans had for Keith and Seabrook onto Murray, who newer fans had probably never heard of. At the same time, old-time fans are able to remember the past with Murray on the blue line, and get excited about the new young players due to his praise of them. The articles appeal to new fans and to established fans. They teach history while remaining relevant and interesting to those fans not looking for a history lesson. They act as conduits to the past – Bob Murray may not have been a name that new fans associated with the Blackhawks, but as they were further exposed to the team and the history,

they had the opportunity to realize and appreciate the importance of Blackhawks alumni. The history was not relegated to the back portions of the website, but nor was it plastered all over the site to force new fans to learn. The well-balanced integration of history and present day held a wide appeal and helped to connect different generations of fans and players.

The content on the website also worked to engage fans and enrich their experience with the team. More behind the scenes features were added, and, as the internet grew and technology developed, more media options were utilized to connect fans with their team. As early as 2005, the Blackhawks had a feature on the website called HawkCast, featuring podcasts of player interviews (“HawkCast #15”). By providing content through different types of media – textual and audio – the Blackhawks were already working on enhancing the fans’ website experience. Audio allowed fans to actually hear the players speak, which can help to forge further connections with the team. The website also featured photo galleries, yet another type of media that could enrich fans’ experience with the team. These photo galleries included action shots from the game, behind the scenes pictures of the players, and pictures of the various team events throughout the Chicago area. The pictures integrated all of the different aspects of the Blackhawks organization. Fans curious about going to games could see high quality action photographs showing great plays, while fans interested in the players could see behind the scenes photos of them with their teammates at dinner or on the plane. Additionally, by posting pictures from the events, fans were able to see the activities that were offered, and were possibly motivated to attend the next event to engage with the team.

To add even further value and branding, the Blackhawks offered their fans free customized looks for their computer. They had a section for free desktop wallpapers featuring many players – past and present – and also many moments like the Winter Classic. Fans could

download a Blackhawks-themed web browser as well. These features did not so much contribute to attaining fans – no one becomes a fan to get a customized web browser – however, they did increase engagement with the team. Fans that wanted to show off their team, or that become attached to a certain player, could show this off through their computer. It is a common way of expressing oneself, especially as the internet and computer usage became more popular. The Blackhawks were sure to capitalize on this and provide options for their fans to make the Blackhawks a part of their online experience.

The Blackhawks' excellent use of their website as a communication tool and as a place for fans to gain access to their team was made possible by external trends and internal integration efforts. 2007, the year that the marketing revolution began in the Blackhawks organization, was also the year that marked when over 50% of households in the United States subscribed to broadband internet services ("Half of Households"). A well-designed website, developed with the end user – fans who wanted to be more involved with the team – in mind, became a great necessity. The Blackhawks' commitment to consistently providing digital content that their fans were interested in, as well as their endeavors to remain current with advancements in web and media technology and trends helped them to turn their online presence into one of their greatest strengths.

The Blackhawks' online efforts were also seamlessly integrated with other aspects of their strategy. The website featured a "Fan Zone" with sections dedicated to: contests and promotions, Blackhawks Bars, the Blackhawks Convention, and their Fan Ambassadors program. On-site fan engagement initiatives and events like the Training Camp Festival were promoted via the website. When the website did features on these programs, it informed fans about them and also communicated the value and benefits of the programs, integrating online

and in-person channels. This will be seen even further when I examine the creation of Blackhawks TV, which was a groundbreaking new feature that engaged fans and non-fans, but it was also visible in the Blackhawks' early efforts to sustain their considerable online presence.

Additionally, the external environment was ripe for the Blackhawks' creation of team social networking accounts. In October of 2007, when Rocky Wirtz took over, there were 50 million active Facebook users, and less than one year later, in August of 2008, the number had doubled to 100 million active users (Parr). The numbers grew exponentially, and by the middle of the 2009-2010 season, there were almost 400 million active users (Parr). Twitter did not completely catch on until later, but by December of 2008, over 1 billion tweets had been sent and there were over 7 million users (Hernandez; Ostrow). 2009 saw an increase to over 18 million users and the platform would continue to grow (Wolfe). The explosion in popularity of social media certainly contributed to the Blackhawks' ability to connect with fans and market the team, providing a platform to reach an audience constantly hungry for content, access, and communication. However, it was the Blackhawks' strategy in the social media realm that truly separated the team from others.

The Blackhawks' social media strategy is best described by Director of New Media, Adam Kempenaar, who is in charge of running the accounts. When social media began to take hold in the United States, Kempenaar recognized that there was no "how-to" manual to guide organizations through the new platforms (Kempenaar). Brands all had to start from square one – but it was those brands that took the time to understand not only the platform, but the motivations and needs of the users of the platform, that truly were able to capitalize. Since social media is a constantly evolving channel, not only are there no step-by-step instructions, but anything that you finally get a grasp on runs the risk of becoming obsolete in weeks. It is about

staying on top of the trends and ahead of the competition in creating and developing unique and engaging content. Engagement for the Blackhawks, according to Kempenaar, was never a one way push to fans. Instead, he believed in having a voice and trying to be authentic and entertaining – characteristics that he has worked hard to maintain when managing the Blackhawks’ social media accounts (Kempenaar). Having a voice for social media accounts can help to enhance connection with fans, who see the personality behind the organization. The Blackhawks were already working on making players feel more “human” to fans – it made sense for them to continue this philosophy with their brand itself.

The Blackhawks have also taken pride in the amount of access they provide to fans. First of all, by giving their brand a voice, they emphasized the person-to-person relationship they would like to build and sustain with fans, which made fans feel that the team cared for them enough to interact with them. For fans that needed convincing that the team was truly dedicated to serving their fans, this simple interaction between the team – which obviously took the time and effort to create a brand that catered to connecting with fans – and the fanbase, showed that the Blackhawks were back, this time as an organization that wanted to embrace the city. But it wasn’t just the team’s voice that embodied connection and interaction, it was also the content that the Blackhawks were focused on delivering.

According to Kempenaar, the Blackhawks organization allowed their social media staff unparalleled access to the team, giving them the ability to capture behind the scenes photos, videos, and insights to share with fans (Kempenaar). This goes back to the Blackhawks’ philosophy of increased fan access to the team. By having top leadership in the organization agree to policies that increase the marketing staff’s ability to access the players for exclusive content, the Blackhawks set themselves up for social media success. Many times, it can be hard



to get this access as hockey operations and business sides of an organization do not mix, but for the Blackhawks, their unique integration of both sides gives them an advantage over many teams. Their fans got to receive up to the minute news, behind the scenes videos, and incredible access available nowhere else. This encouraged fans to follow the Blackhawks on social media, and they felt rewarded when they regularly received these exclusive updates. Contests and promotions are also run to encourage sharing or retweeting – expanding the Blackhawks’ follower base and increasing awareness about the well-run social media accounts.

This social media strategy has been met with an overwhelmingly positive fan response, and is a large reason for the Blackhawks revolution. Kempenaar took pride in the percentage of the Blackhawks tweets that were “at” fans, showing just how well they actively engaged with their followers and fans (Kempenaar). As fans began to trickle back to the team, social media was a great way for them to try to connect with the team. Then, when they experienced the kind of exclusive and engaging content the Blackhawks offered, the Blackhawks’ social media accounts turned away from an organization-to-consumer relationship and more towards a person-to-person relationship, with each party receiving something of value. Fans received special content and prizes, while the Blackhawks increased their fanbase. Then, as more fans started to engage with the Blackhawks, more non-fans were likely to become exposed to the Blackhawks revolution, and possibly check out the team. It is here, with the non-fans, that the type of content shared gains significance. The Blackhawks made sure to post entertaining and funny content showcasing the players’ more human side, which helped to engage the non-fan or casual fan, and generated increased interest in the players and in the team. The Blackhawks’ social media strategy was so noteworthy that in 2009, they won a Mashable Open Web Award for “Best

Brand Use of Twitter” – a sure sign that fans were truly receiving the best content possible with the Blackhawks’ dedication to social networking (“Blackhawks Honored For”).

### **Blackhawks TV**

The Blackhawks’ online and social media presence was certainly enough to welcome and support a growing fanbase, especially in a time in which web content and online presence was exploding amongst people and businesses. In the past, a basic online media strategy was necessary and sufficient to engage fans; however, it was becoming simply an order qualifier – a feature that was expected of teams that wanted to do business in an increasingly digital world. However, the Blackhawks had already expanded upon this, distinguishing themselves with well-written articles that fused the past with the present, an interactive social media program, and exclusive access to behind-the-scenes content that interested fans and made them feel important to the team. But it was their next move that truly separated them from every organization, giving them a unique value that made fans want to be a part of the Blackhawks organization – this program was called Blackhawks TV.

Though video content was already available on [chicagoblackhawks.com](http://chicagoblackhawks.com) in previous seasons, the launch of Blackhawks TV, announced at the beginning of the 2008-2009 season turned out to be a revolutionary move for the new Chicago Blackhawks. Introduced as a “revamped media player”, the service featured “exclusive Blackhawks content on seven channels, providing a state-of-the-art platform for Blackhawks fans to get even closer to their favorite team” (“Blackhawks Launch New”). The player featured 7 channels to appeal to different fans, and according to Adam Kempenaar, the goal was to “take fans behind the scenes and allow them to really get to know who these talented players are on and off the ice” (“Blackhawks Launch New”). Centered around the central theme of increased access to the team, the video service would also go on to increase fan engagement, reinforce the idea of the

players as “stars”, and further establish the new Blackhawks as unique innovators delivering relevant and sometimes even viral content.

The following sections will go further into detail on select original Blackhawks TV channels, including “Blackhawks All-Access”, “Game Day”, and “Remember the Roar”. The descriptions of the content on each of these channels come from years of interaction with Blackhawks TV as a fan, as well as careful consideration of the channels as a researcher for this thesis. All of this information and all of the videos can be found at the Chicago Blackhawks section of the NHL VideoCenter, where different channels can be selected from a drop-down menu. Specific videos are cited within the text, but general descriptions of channels are from “NHL VideoCenter – Chicago Blackhawks”.

The different channels offered on Blackhawks TV presented diverse options for fans. For example, Blackhawks All Access acted as a sort of VIP pass for fans, providing exclusive coverage of the team behind the scenes, allowing them to truly get to know the players (“Blackhawks Launch New”). This channel appealed to the broader fanbase – from the new fans to the die-hards, by exposing the more “human side” of the Blackhawks. As a reinvented organization, the Blackhawks were now concerned with personal relationships – between the team, the front office, and the fans. This necessitated access to the team – access that, as Jay Blunk had pointed out, would now be a part of the Blackhawks marketing strategy for the future (Isaacson). The accessibility welcomed fans back, demonstrating their importance to the organization – something that fans believed had been lacking with the previous administration. It also gave fans a sense of exclusivity and togetherness with the Blackhawks – as a fan, they were now invited to look behind the scenes at the team. By illustrating to fans that they were welcome in all aspects of the team’s lives, the Blackhawks made their fans feel like they were a

part of the team – they were “insiders” rallying together around this new, young, flashy organization.

The other, equally important aspect of Blackhawks All Access concerned the type of content provided by the team. Not only were the fans granted access, but they were invited to experience the players’ personalities – specifically, their goofier and more playful sides. With cameras in the locker room, the hotel, and the bus, the players ribbed each other, pointing out embarrassing things about their teammates or teasing and pranking the young rookies. Fans were able to see the team not as serious athletes, but as young kids having the time of their lives. Earlier, the team’s chemistry was discussed, and Blackhawks TV was a great way to showcase the way that the chemistry carried off the ice as well. The writers and creators of Blackhawks TV did a great job putting players in situations that would result in hilarity, or writing skits that were funny and cute without becoming corny or overdone.

For example, they gave Adam Burish and Patrick Sharp – 2 fan favorites who happened to be roommates – a camera and told them to film their “roomie” experience. Fans got to tag along in this unscripted feature as Sharp and Burish pranked rookies Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews, as well as defenseman Brent Seabrook, in a feature entitled “Pick (On) A Teammate” (“Pick (On)”). Fans watching were “in” on the joke with the guys, and got to see first-hand as Jonathan Toews frantically looks for his hidden bag and Brent Seabrook jumps out of the way of a bucket of cold water. The videos were great because they were not about hockey – they were just fun to watch for any person. Additionally, by choosing two players like Burish and Sharp, with funny and engaging personalities, the Blackhawks TV team was selling the team to non-hockey fans that wanted to see more of those players. It also helped current fans to get to know their team a little better – by feeling as if they know the players personally, they become more

attached to the team. In providing true value off the ice, fans were more engaged and less likely to lose patience if they were unsatisfied with their record on the ice.

Other features were scripted, such as the “Don’t Quit Your Day Job” segment with James Wisniewski, depicting him as a hotel employee in full Blackhawks gear, doing traditional work like carrying bags or checking people in, but with a decidedly hockey flair (“James Wisniewski”). The video was light and funny, but still tied to hockey – and once again featured a very marketable personality in Wisniewski. It also seemed to send the message that hockey had returned and it was infiltrating everyday life, showing the city of Chicago that the team was back and that Blackhawks gear was going to start popping up around the city.

Less elaborate content was just as effective at engaging fans through humor. The Blackhawks TV team set up themed interviews, asking questions like “What teammate is most likely to cry at the movies?” and encouraging good-natured teasing amongst the players. Other interviews focused around themes like “The Circus” asking players what they would do in the circus, accompanied by photoshopped images of their descriptions (“Which Blackhawk”; “Which Circus”). At a time in which memes and photoshop were starting to take hold on the internet, these videos and images were quite effective at appealing to fans and legitimizing Blackhawks TV. They began a segment with the impossibly cute “Joey the Junior Reporter” – a five year old boy who interviews the players about everything from favorite toys to girls (“Joey the Junior”). Other productions involved scripts, such as the “Twelve Days of Chicago Blackhawks Christmas” song released every year and the “At the Movies” feature, with the players dressed up as popular movie characters (“The Twelve”; “Blackhawks at the Movies”). These appealed to fans of all ages, and once again showed the way the team worked to associate itself with a vast array of interests. Fans enjoyed seeing the players who were able to let loose

and make fun of themselves – it helped reinforce that the players were down to earth and the type of “regular” guys that fans wanted to associate with. These features turned the players into stars and celebrities, ideas that the Blackhawks fortified with their player appearances and red carpet events. These types of videos truly helped the Blackhawks break into the mainstream in Chicago – Adam Kempenaar remembers that people would come up to him and say they didn’t even watch hockey but they watch “The Pranksters” all the time. In his view, if the content and videos produced are well-done and funny, anyone will want to watch it, and this is exactly what Blackhawks TV did for the Blackhawks (Kempenaar).

Next, the Game Day channel offered in-depth looks into the actual game, streaming morning skate, interviews, and coach press conferences. Game day balanced out the All Access channel, ensuring that hockey did not get lost in all of the fun. Fans that were streaming funny videos also had the chance to come across hockey videos showing all aspects of the game. Once again, the theme of accessibility was continued, this time involving looks into the hockey operations side of the organization. All Access attracted and engaged fans, while Game Day provided engaged fans with the opportunity to become as immersed as possible with their team’s activities on the ice. This was significant because while the first challenge is to appeal to and engage with fans, the team must then have the structures in place to continue and escalate the engagement. As fans became more deeply connected to the team and to the game of hockey, they wanted to know everything that was happening with them. The Blackhawks gave them this opportunity by streaming the morning skate – something that fans don’t normally get to see. Then, they opened up the locker room and provided as many interviews and press conferences as possible when the game ended, for those fans that still wanted more.

The more fans were able to see of the team, the deeper the connection could become. Fans felt special in getting access to the team, and also motivated to consume content and team news throughout game day. This channel turned the two-and-a-half hour game into an entire daily event – home or away. The United Center only seats 20,000 – the Blackhawks realized that the enriched “game day” experience of live hockey was unfortunately limited. Therefore, they took to the digital realm, making up for having to watch through a screen by adding value to that screen. Fans that tuned into the game on TV didn’t have to stop there anymore – Blackhawks TV was always there to solidify and expand on their connection to the team. This ensured that the Blackhawks never had to be far from a loyal fan’s mind.

Additionally, “Remember the Roar” was a notable channel that was completely dedicated to tradition, once again showing how well the Blackhawks integrate their history with their current team. As discussed earlier, the Blackhawks made their tradition relevant to fans – amongst the fanbase, Bobby Hull and Jonathan Toews were equally revered. The Remember the Roar videos acted as miniature history lessons, but were still entertaining and were designed to instill a deep sense of pride as a fan. They helped fans to feel more engaged with the players of the past, and also further differentiated the new Blackhawks from expansion teams, giving them a solid baseline of history to legitimize the organization. On this channel, fans could learn about or reminisce upon old rivalries and legendary players, as well as immerse themselves in the traditions of the Blackhawks – such as the National Anthem. As the past became more relevant, the present held more meaning. For example, cheering for the Anthem was electric in itself, but knowing the history behind it gave context and pride to the act. Also, as fans saw the immense respect for Mikita and Hull – 40 years after their glory days – they were able to see reflections of their greatness in young stars Kane and Toews. Seeing this generated excitement about

possibilities for the future, and generated a sense of pride and connection – the idea that you were seeing legends in the making and that you were a part of it. It was a powerful feeling for fans – the idea of witnessing greatness – and Blackhawks TV created and amplified this by reflecting on the past and showing fans the significance of what they were seeing in the present.

As a standalone feature, Blackhawks TV was an admirable service – however, it was the integration of Blackhawks TV into the other aspects of their organization that truly formed a cohesive marketing strategy. As the Blackhawks worked to expand their footprint around Chicago, various events and appearances were scheduled to bring fans closer to the team. Among these were the various player appearances, the Blackhawks Convention, and the Training Camp Festival. However, once again, most of these offerings had capacity restrictions that prevented maximum attendance and participation. Blackhawks TV worked to connect fans at home with the events via live streaming and special behind-the-scenes features, giving fans virtual access to the team. For newer or unsure fans, these videos served as advertisements and previews for future events – they could see the electricity involved at the opening ceremony for the Convention, or the up-close and personal experience they could get by attending a player autograph signing. Once again, Blackhawks TV was implemented as a constant reminder of the 365 day marketing plan that the Chicago Blackhawks worked for. There was always something happening with the team, and with Blackhawks TV, any fan that tuned in was sure to stay connected throughout the year.

Blackhawks TV also provided fresh content for social media, and the staff's constant diligence to remain relevant and stay on top of the trends helped to increase popularity and engagement in the increasingly important, yet still mysterious world of digital media and marketing. With a progressively social fanbase, the integration of Blackhawks TV with the



team's social media strategy became a large part of the organization's success in engaging fans. Video content in itself is considered to be more engaging than text or pictures (Rosensteel). However, what the Blackhawks provided were well-written (or planned), well-produced, and therefore, well-received videos that entertained fans. Fans were treated to the humorous All Access videos that were likely to be shared with friends if found amusing. The Blackhawks did not have to beg or incentivize fans for "retweets" or "shares" – fans were automatically doing it based on the merit of the content provided (Kempenaar). It acted as a sort of word of mouth advertising for the Blackhawks. Word of mouth, since it is virtually uncontrolled by the organization, is thought by consumers to be more trustworthy information ("Under the Influence"). In the same sense, the Blackhawks videos, shared by fans just because they find them humorous (not because each share gets them an entry into a contest), were quite efficient in spreading the good word about the new Blackhawks team. The hockey and traditions videos worked in the same way for established fans – the videos were well-planned and well-executed, and provided exclusive and desired content found nowhere else. It was reason enough to follow the Blackhawks on social media and to engage with the organization.

The Blackhawks were one of the first organizations in the NHL to make a concerted effort to extend their brand through consistent content such as Blackhawks TV (Kempenaar). However, it is necessary to note that the magic of Blackhawks TV was carefully crafted and required a certain structure to develop and sustain it. Kempenaar cited three things – talent, access, and player cooperation – as the keys to Blackhawks TV. With regards to talent, he stressed the fact that the Blackhawks had the right resources and equipment, as well as the right people, to produce well-executed videos. The editors and producers worked to make sure that each video made for Blackhawks TV was quality (Kempenaar). Excellence was now

synonymous with the Blackhawks, and videos' value for fans was derived from an entertaining viewing experience. Without the right support staff and crew, the videos and the concepts for the videos would have been as strong.

Additionally, the coordination between hockey operations and the front office played a large role in the success of Blackhawks TV. The cameras were allowed complete access to the team, and the organization expected cooperation from the players in remaining visible to the fans. The players understood that this affected marketing and ticket sales, which affected the amount of money that could be spent to put a quality team on the ice and win a Stanley Cup. This understanding meant that the Blackhawks TV crew could film more regularly and provide much more frequent and relevant content for fans than they would have been able to without an all-access pass. The player cooperation was also monumentally important, as many of the features on Blackhawks TV involve humor – including making fun of yourself, teasing your teammates, and saying “crazy” lines. According to Kempenaar, most players, when presented with an idea, even if they think it’s crazy, they will go along with it and are generally “great” to work with (Kempenaar). This showed in the videos as the players seemed genuinely to be having fun. It was also important that the players were comfortable with this, as one of the goals of the All Access videos was to showcase personalities – if players were guarded or not trusting of the camera crew, it would have been much harder to get content that fans could relate to or would respond positively to.

Finally, the Blackhawks were always working to improve on Blackhawks TV. To reach out to the fans, they utilized the Fan’s Voice surveys to gather data on what fans thought of the videos. They also did focus groups throughout the year, and one of them was specifically focused on Blackhawks TV (Kempenaar). They worked to understand their audience to find

what they would respond to, or what they would like to see more of. Additionally, they were able to look at the amount of hits or views for each video to determine what kinds of things fans are interested in clicking on. Monitoring social media response provided yet another way of hearing from fans, as comments and reach numbers were able to show what kinds of videos were popular or worked best for certain fans. The Blackhawks were always listening and developing new content for Blackhawks TV, and it was this very commitment to keeping their videos fresh, relevant, and entertaining that made Blackhawks TV an incredibly popular feature for fans, connecting them to the team and making them a part of the renewal of the Chicago Blackhawks.

The resurgence was a combination of multiple factors that transformed the Blackhawks from an out-of-touch and reviled franchise into an engaging, accessible, and relevant sports team that valued their fans and generated buzz with every move they made. Next, I will discuss how the integration of each of these factors turned many individual strategic decisions into an enormous organizational revolution.

## **Discussion**

Each of the myriad of factors discussed above affected the Blackhawks' revolutionary rise to popularity in Chicago. Their situation was complex and unique. In the early 2000's, there was no one sweeping issue that plagued the franchise and drove fans away – instead it was the combination of multiple external forces and internal decisions that generated negative press and alienated fans. Additionally, with no unified business strategy to provide value for fans, there were no tactics dedicated to cultivating and building fan engagement for the long run. Therefore, it was not simply one or two large decisions or changes that helped the Blackhawks out of the hole they had dug for themselves. It was the integration of multiple actions and initiatives, conceived and developed to support an overlying fan-centered business strategy. This strategy

was developed from thorough consideration of the environment and the market. A carefully constructed internal organizational structure supported this strategy, and enabled it to succeed. Each action and decision built upon previous initiatives, and it was the cohesive sum of these parts that elevated the Blackhawks to their elite status.

In Jay Barney's 1995 analysis of competitive positioning, he notes "more and more frequently, a firm's competitive advantage seems to depend on numerous 'small decisions' through which a firm's resources are developed and exploited" (Barney). This case study of the Chicago Blackhawks has shown just how applicable this idea is. When analyzing an organization's success, big decisions seem attractive because we tend to like large, sweeping ideas that simplify the messy process of problem solving. However, when it comes to implementation and execution, the small but interconnected factors are what drive strategic positioning, and it is this very integration that propelled the Blackhawks' success. Therefore, it was not just the big decision to air games on television, nor was it the influx of talent in the form of Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews that turned the Blackhawks around. They certainly played a large role, but the total and sweeping takeover of the city of Chicago required a much more complex assembly of interrelated factors working together.

To illustrate this, let's just examine the relation between these two factors – television and talent. If the decision had been made to televise games – but nothing else – then the impact would have been much weaker and narrower, and the process would have been much more challenging. This is because with nothing else to support the team, leaders in the organization would have had a more difficult time convincing television providers to air their games, bringing back top-notch broadcasting talent like Pat Foley, and obtaining enough sponsors for the programming. Once this was achieved, the games would be shown on television, but any fans

that decided to tune in would have seen a mediocre team playing hockey and not much else. Furthermore, in doing the bare minimum with airing games on television, the organization wouldn't have showcased the live atmosphere at games, or provided extra features on the players to engage fans despite the performance on the ice. It is possible that the Hawks would have gained a few more fans and viewers, but with no other value other than home game visibility, the revolution would not have occurred.

Conversely, one can imagine what would have happened if talent – without television, team chemistry, or marketing – was the only change to affect the Blackhawks. Fans watching road games and season ticket holders would have been the only ones exposed to the great hockey in Chicago. Gradually – via news stories or word of mouth – it is probable that more fans would have made efforts to tune in, but the love and loyalty surrounding the Blackhawks would not be nearly as strong. With no other media to connect to the team other than road telecasts and home radio broadcasts, the team would have only appealed those fans who were interested in the game of hockey. Any gain would have been extremely short term with no other efforts made to develop or connect with fans – the moment that the record dipped, so would attendance. Additionally, it was the entire revolution – the buzz and the talent – that drew critical free agents like Brian Campbell and Marian Hossa to join the team. With nothing else to support young and promising draft picks, there is the possibility that these key signings may not have happened – and the Blackhawks may not have had the chance to put the best team on the ice possible.

I chose the brief example of comparing the effects of television and talent because many fans, when talking about the resurgence, will quickly conclude one of two things when asked why the Blackhawks came back. “TV!” or “Kane and Toews!” are the usual answers, and while they certainly did play a large role, this case study analysis shows that it is in fact the integration

of many small decisions around a larger business strategy, cultivated and supported by top-level management, that truly brought the Blackhawks back to prominence in Chicago. In this section, I will outline the key interrelations between the changes that the Blackhawks' new leadership sparked for the team, its employees, and the fans.

The Blackhawks' revolution started with a change in ownership and high-level front office personnel. This in itself is significant because for sweeping organizational change to occur, top management must be behind it every step of the way. Executives that are against the new direction must be brought on board or dismissed to ensure that there is no confusion in the new shared mission and values. That is not to say that all who do not agree with everything right away must leave, but it does speak to the importance of communicating the new vision and the reasons behind it, and then only retaining those that are willing to "buy in" and work towards the new common goal. Top management cohesion was important because all downward communication needed to reflect the new culture and strategy – there could be no mixed messages or unclear expectations. Fortunately, when Rocky and McDonough came in, they understood this, and every human resource decision thereafter reflected this. The organizational values and mission were stated clearly and the implementation of the franchise's new strategy was facilitated by the complete transformation.

The Blackhawks' new business strategy was fan-centered, and emphasized quality and value for fans over all else. Where before, money and the bottom line – driven only by ticket sales – were considered to be the number one priority, the new administration had different ideas. Rocky and McDonough worked to emphasize fan satisfaction and engagement in the short term to drive fan loyalty in the long term. They wanted the team and the organization to feel accessible, which would aid in forging connections and relationships with fans. To do this,

they were concerned with providing quality both on and off the ice. They worked to instill a winning philosophy within the organization, showing fans that their new mission was putting a great product on the ice and winning a Stanley Cup for the city of Chicago. They worked to build trust between the fans and the organization by showing their newfound dedication in every way they could, from their slogan to their player acquisitions. Off the ice, the strategy centered around value creation and innovation to augment the team's performance on the ice. John McDonough fought an ongoing battle against internal satisfaction and complacency, and established the idea of treating every season and every problem as if the Blackhawks were 0-82. It helped to take the uncertainty out of sports marketing, and also established a precedent for constant improvement and innovation. This created enormous amounts of value for fans in a short time period, and also enabled the Blackhawks to stay on top of the trends and buzz once they vaulted back to prominence.

The new strategy necessitated a new organizational culture to support and extend its implementation and development – and ultimately its success. Once again, this was enabled due to the strong backing it received from top leadership, and due to the clear communication of values and goals. Just as the business strategy emphasized people, so did the organizational culture, where relationships, cooperation, and trust were paramount. Within the front office alone, the value of employees was quite evident. The Blackhawks' management made them privy to sensitive information – such as trades or future plans – showing great trust that they would keep the information private. They also communicated plans throughout the organization so that everyone was on the same page, and there was no confusion. This created an environment of respect, and employees felt valued and were more motivated to work hard towards the common goals. Additionally, the new culture worked to instil mutual cooperation

and respect between the business side of the organization and the hockey operations side. Through effective communication, the hockey staff understood the goals of the front office and was willing to cooperate with many of their proposed initiatives. At the same time, the business side recognized the value of the hockey side and treated the players and coaches very well, providing them with everything they needed and working to bring them a large and excited fanbase to play for.

Not only did the new culture focus on fostering positive and mutually beneficial relationships, but it also highlighted and reinforced innovation and creativity. It was clearly communicated to employees that fan satisfaction, not revenue, was the main goal of all of their efforts. Without constant pressure to be directly contributing to the bottom line, employees were better able to come up with new and creative ideas, that while perhaps not tried and true, were unique and compelling, and most importantly, provided value to the fans. The way that the team treated employees – showing trust in their judgment and abilities – also nurtured innovation, as employees were more likely to believe in themselves and their ideas, and to look “outside the box” for ways to engage fans. Employees saw how much upper level management valued advancement through John McDonough’s aversion to satisfaction and complacency. To avoid complacency, innovation was imperative, and so the organizational culture fit seamlessly with the new strategy of the organization. There was no confusion, and there was an abundance of support. Rocky and McDonough expected a lot from their employees and their organization, but they also were sure to provide the necessary environment and resources to enable continued improvement and success.

With the right leadership, strategy, and organizational structure in place, the Blackhawks worked to provide value for fans on every level. The first step in this process was the having the



ability to assess the current situation and to understand the strengths and weaknesses present in the franchise. This would then enable the organization to leverage the resources available to take advantage of their environment and to exploit these strengths and weaknesses.

First, immediately aware of the 2005 rule changes that quickened the pace of hockey and made it a more appealing spectator sport to the masses, Rocky Wirtz moved quickly upon his arrival to improve the visibility of the Blackhawks, putting the games on television and utilizing partnerships to reach the largest audience possible. These partnerships also took into account Chicago's status as a large sports town, and therefore, pairings with the city's other teams were quickly organized. Also, McDonough and Wirtz saw previously uncovered and unutilized strengths in the team's strong history and their many former Hall of Fame Players. They worked with Bob Verdi to understand their legacies – to understand what their play and their personalities meant to the organization. They also recognized value in the team's tradition – namely in their status as an Original Six team and in the once-exhilarating but now sadly dormant National Anthem tradition. Even more important, they were able to understand how the team's tradition and history could represent weaknesses, and they recognized the need to find a way to turn them around and make them work for the franchise.

Additionally, the organization's new leaders were well aware of their current situation early in the 2007-2008 season. They were a team with up and coming draft picks and a newly-signed television contract, and also a business that had employed a strong organizational culture to facilitate cooperation between hockey operations and business. They saw the opportunity in the increased visibility of their talented team, and also in their personable young players who were willing to take extra steps for their franchise. To take advantage of this, the Blackhawks sought out every medium of communication, and especially concentrated on the integration of

the live event and the digital realm. They also noticed the increase in the use of social media and online marketing, as well as the popularity of video content over traditional text content. The Blackhawks had everything in place to ensure their success – the people, the strategy, the culture, the team, the history, and the atmosphere – but it was their ability to truly integrate and utilize their resources to implement their plans that truly brought the franchise back to prominence in Chicago.

First, where the Blackhawks recognized that they had value, they took advantage. As fans began to watch the Blackhawks on television, and saw the exciting play of Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane, interest in the team increased. The Blackhawks worked to capitalize on this quickly with their 365 day marketing strategy, ensuring that the Blackhawks were never far from the minds of those that paid attention to them. This marketing strategy worked across mediums, employing publicity, partnerships, community appearances, fan and player events, online and social media marketing, and the television coverage itself. Television coverage served as an advertisement of the atmosphere at live games, and the tradition and pride that went along with being a Blackhawks fan. Partnerships and community appearances would extend the Blackhawks' reach across the city, bolstered by accompanying videos or social media contests to increase engagement over different channels.

Events like the Blackhawks Convention and the Training Camp Festival furthered the theme of fan access to the team, and helped to forge connections with players. This was augmented by online marketing, social media, and Blackhawks TV. By adding online video features and social media initiatives to accompany these events, fans were always engaged with the team. Those that attended events received lasting video memories from Blackhawks TV, and fans that could not attend were still treated to special behind-the-scenes features and live updates

through Twitter and Facebook that showcased their favorite players and kept them interested in the Blackhawks. Also, since there was so much cooperation between the business and hockey sides of the organization, it was easy for the Hawks to implement these types of player events and features, knowing that they would be willing to help and would have good chemistry with the fans or in front of the camera. The videos and the social media presence served to increase the celebrity status of the players, as fans were exposed to their play and their personalities and wanted to be associated with them. The more “human” connections forged via these new media channels resulted in stronger affiliations with the team. Access and connections were truly creating value off the ice, which was a significant part of John McDonough’s vision – it is this type of value that goes beyond short term fan satisfaction and builds long term fan loyalty that will sustain even through losing records.

Finally, once again, tradition, pride, and history were integrated through all of this. This helped to bridge the generation gap and to legitimize the greatness of the current organization by showing how much the Blackhawks truly deserved to be entwined in the fabric of Chicago sports. Tradition also allowed fans to make comparisons between past greats like Hull and Mikita and current stars like Kane and Toews; comparisons like these served to increase excitement and buzz for the team, as fans believed they were seeing history in the making. Fans were able to get to know Hull and Mikita just as well as Kane and Toews through special game ceremonies, panels at the Blackhawks Convention, alumni autograph signings, and history and tradition features produced regularly on Blackhawks TV. Just like the current Blackhawks, the legacy of the team was never far from fans’ minds and it instilled feelings of pride and tradition that once again added value off of the ice.

The Blackhawks had vaulted from a bleak situation under stubborn ownership and outdated marketing and organizational philosophies, to earning a spot deep inside the hearts of many Chicago sports fans in just two short seasons. New leadership brought large, sweeping changes to the franchise's business strategy and the organizational structure and culture. Yet it was the way that the Blackhawks utilized their new model and implemented their new initiatives that truly drove the transition. The reinvention was built upon a foundation of dedication to providing value to fans both on and off the ice. Trust was built between the organization and the city through player signings, moves to bring back legendary players, unprecedented access to the team, and a renewed commitment to win. Then, it was the seamless integration of multiple marketing decisions, fan engagement initiatives, and innovative ideas, communicated through various channels, and combined with the increasingly exciting performance of a young and engaging team that created the buzz and excitement that turned the comeback into an entire revolution. By the end of the 2008-2009 season, the Hawks were back – in all ways but one – and then in 2010, the team delivered on their promise, bringing a Stanley Cup to Chicago.

Another franchise might have stopped there. After all, as discussed earlier, the Miami Heat were quick to cut their ticket sales staff after winning a championship – they were at the top, not much need to sell tickets to sold out games. The conventional knowledge is that when a team is at the top, the only place they can go is down. This alone should be enough reason to charge ahead and work to sustain the progress and success the organization has already achieved – no one wants to go down, so work must be done to stay at the top. But John McDonough and the Blackhawks took this further, and continued to go up, even from the top. They produced a book, written and developed in house, commemorating the championship. At first, it may seem ordinary, as many teams do this. However, Bob Verdi explains that while every team produces

books dedicated to their championship season, few take the time, the effort, or the money to create it themselves and create a quality book done “right” (Verdi, Bob. Personal Interview). For the Blackhawks, top performance on the ice was always matched by top quality behind the scenes – and this would continue in the following years. Even if on-ice performance and Stanley Cup wins could not be directly controlled, the organization continued to reach out to fans, provide them with unique value, and engage them with the team.

Most notable is the growth and creativity in the Blackhawks’ online and social media strategy in recent years. As online media consumption in the United States has increased and funny video shorts, memes, and entertaining blogs have gained popularity over newspaper articles, traditional television, and basic websites, the Blackhawks have made sure to stay alongside the trends, providing their fans with relevant content through the channels that fans prefer. For example, the Fan Ambassador program was created to connect fans to the team through social media, making them almost an honorary part of the organization by tasking them with sharing Blackhawks bits with all of their followers on various sites (“Fan Ambassadors”). The benefits of this program for the Blackhawks are twofold. First, the fans involved feel truly connected with the team, almost as team representatives, which makes them feel valued and strengthens their engagement with the Blackhawks. Additionally, these fans act as conduits for positive word of mouth, spreading the Blackhawks buzz in a way that feels more organic to their followers than if the Blackhawks were to post the same content. By providing incentives and asking fans to work for them, the Blackhawks are able to take advantage of the goodwill that goes along with fan participatory programs and the social media presence of their fans.

Additionally, the Blackhawks have begun their Blackhawks Blogs, which provide a mix of team and player news, feature articles, and entertaining content – such as photoshopped

pictures and themed Q&A's ("Blackhawks Blog"). In a digital world where websites like [buzzfeed.com](http://buzzfeed.com) and [reddit.com](http://reddit.com) are increasingly popular, this Blackhawks Blog works to provide similarly entertaining and interesting content, but specific to the Blackhawks. Fans are both informed and entertained, and the content is easily shared via links to Facebook and Twitter below each post. The Blackhawks have also begun a "Fan Mosaic" – allowing fans to post pictures of themselves along with their Blackhawks-related "One Goal", to be displayed in a digital compilation ("Become Part"). This once again encourages fan participation, forging stronger connections to the team as they post about their love of the Blackhawks alongside the rest of the fanbase. Additionally, having their picture displayed on the Blackhawks website is a point of pride among fans who want to be associated with the team, and they are once again likely to share this with their friends. The Blackhawks have also developed ways to make their team a part of everyday text conversations, with free download-able Blackhawks emojis ("Share Blackhawks Text Messages"). Then, the Blackhawks developed their own App so that fans never have to miss an update no matter where they are ("Official Chicago Blackhawks"). Each of these tactics have worked to extend the Blackhawks' reach and relevance on social media by finding new ways to motivate and engage fans to make the Blackhawks more a part of their life.

In addition to increasing their social media and online presence, in general, the Blackhawks have sustained their dominance and popularity via their philosophy of continuous quality and improvement. The results from their Fan's Voice program and focus groups are carefully deconstructed, examined, and analyzed, so that improvements suggested by fans can be implemented swiftly and exactly as planned (DiLenardi). Departments like Ticket Sales and Service work to keep their 99% renewal rate and events like the Blackhawks Convention and the Training Camp Festival continue to support the largely successful 365 day marketing strategy.

Fresh content is regularly conceived and produced for Blackhawks TV, taking into account current events, fan input, and creative new ideas from the New Media department. Also, the NHL has continued to produce outdoor games, and the Blackhawks recently were able to take part in yet another nationally-televised outdoor game, this time at Soldier Field versus the Pittsburgh Penguins. The game generated a 14.9 television rating and created buzz throughout the city for weeks before and after the actual event (NBC Sports Group). Finally, fortunately for the Blackhawks, the team has continued to perform exceedingly well on the ice, winning yet another Stanley Cup in the shortened 2012-2013 season. The team does not appear to be ready to slow down anytime soon, and the front office is not willing to either.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis, taking the form of a case study, has endeavored to understand the multiple factors that contributed to the Chicago Blackhawks' meteoric rise to popularity in the city of Chicago. Research was conducted through interviews with various Blackhawks personnel and members of the Chicago media, as well as through careful evaluation of primary sources like newspaper articles and official press releases. This helped to construct a detailed picture of the dismal situation the Blackhawks found themselves in prior to 2007, as well as to outline the multiple, interconnected factors that worked in cohesion to attract, engage, and energize Chicago fans from the years 2007-2009. The research and subsequent analysis showed that it was not one factor that was responsible for the sweeping revolution, but rather the carefully planned integration of decisions and marketing initiatives – and their subsequent successful implementation – that truly created extraordinary value for fans and motivated them to return to the team and connect with the franchise. Multiple news articles have briefly summarized the factors responsible for the Blackhawks resurgence, but this is the first large case study dedicated

to formulating a detailed understanding of the many internal decisions and external forces that worked for and against each other to create the unique and compelling story that characterized the Blackhawks' rise from 2007-2009.

The Blackhawks' comeback was sparked by strong leadership, who championed a drastically different fan-centered business strategy and nurtured a strong organizational structure to support their new business plan. All initiatives and decisions subsequently developed were designed to build off of this culture and bolster the franchise's strategy through integration and cohesion. Special attention was paid to trends in the external environment and in fan perceptions to ensure that the Blackhawks remained relevant in both the content and value provided, and in the channels through which this was communicated. All of this was in place to provide value off of the ice due to the inherent risk in sports marketing – that the team will finish with a terrible record. However, the Blackhawks as a team also drove the revolution, with young players Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews leading the way, playing exciting, and more importantly, winning hockey. The hockey sides and the business sides of the team worked together to understand each other and develop a mutually-beneficial relationship that fostered collaboration and enabled the Hawks to connect the team to the fans in ways teams had never tried before. Finally, the Blackhawks' concentration on innovation and creativity aided in the development of Blackhawks TV and other engaging content that increased fan access to the team and allowed them to see the players' colorful personalities – forming deeper connections to the team that resulted in increased long term fan loyalty.

By 2009, the revolution was in full swing, with the Blackhawks already leading the NHL in attendance (Exhibit 1) and the team quickly rising to the top of the standings ("2008/2009 Playoff"). The buzz continued, with the team winning Stanley Cups in 2010 and 2013, but



through it all, the Blackhawks staff did not deter from their strategy at all. With more fans to satisfy and limited tickets available, they did not take away access and turn away fans; instead they looked for new ways to open doors for fans, increasingly turning to social media to engage the growing fanbase in the digital realm – where new features could be uploaded almost immediately, and shared so easily that they could take on viral proportions. The Blackhawks took care to engage fans in the present, but were always thinking of the future ways they could provide value for their fans.

By examining the rapid success of the Chicago Blackhawks, this thesis has shown that their success was about the integration of many small decisions and external factors, and that due to the many possible permutations and combinations of these factors, the Blackhawks' situation was quite unique. It cannot be cut and pasted into another struggling organization as a recipe for success. Each organization has a unique history, a unique relationship with their city and their fanbase, and a unique set of resources and capabilities that must be first understood, and then leveraged in order to achieve success. The Blackhawks clearly found a combination that worked for them; there was certainly no “right” answer – though there were plenty of wrong ones. In future research, it would be beneficial to do a comparison between the Blackhawks and other teams – such as the Pittsburgh Penguins – that have gone through similar transitions to see if certain factors or even combinations of factors show up on multiple occasions. Additionally, though research on social media and digital marketing is still in its early stages, it would be interesting to examine the effect that these new marketing technologies and techniques have had on sports marketing and the NHL in general – and to discover the impact of an effective social media strategy on fan engagement and loyalty. The Chicago Blackhawks are not the first sports team to take their city by storm, and they certainly won't be the last, but by carefully breaking

down the elements of their successful strategy, we are better able to understand the multiple dynamics that make up each team's strategic position.

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## Exhibits

### Exhibit 1:

| Exhibit 1: Blackhawks Yearly Attendance                                    |            |                  |                |          |
|--|------------|------------------|----------------|----------|
| Year   | Attendance | Percent Capacity | Rank in League | % Change |
| 01-02  | 15,568     | 0.76             | 23/30          |          |
| 02-03  | 14,794     | 0.72             | 24/30          | -4.97    |
| 03-04  | 13,253     | 0.65             | 27/30          | -10.42   |
| 04-05  |            |                  |                |          |
| 05-06  | 13,318     | 0.65             | 29/30          | 0.49     |
| 06-07  | 12,727     | 0.62             | 29/30          | -4.44    |
| 07-08  | 16814      | 0.82             | 19/30          | 32.11    |
| 08-09*   | 21,752     | 1.06             | 1/30           | 29.37    |
| 09-10  | 21,356     | 1.04             | 1/30           | -1.82    |
| 10-11  | 21,423     | 1.05             | 1/30           | 0.31     |
| 11-12  | 21,533     | 1.05             | 1/30           | 0.51     |
| 12-13  | 21,755     | 1.06             | 1/30           | 1.03     |
| *08-09 was Winter Classic season; w/ Winter Classic, attendance was 22,247 |            |                  |                |          |

Red divider indicates season when Rocky Wirtz took over ownership of the Blackhawks from his father, William Wirtz.

Sources: Attendance for the 06-07 season from Mickle, “Teams To Watch”; attendance numbers from the 08-09 season without the Winter Classic included (the number represented in the chart), from Mickle, “Revivals in Chicago”. All other attendance numbers are from “NHL Attendance Report” at ESPN.com.

Exhibit 2: Summary of Blackhawks Salaries: 2007-08 season to 2011-12 season.

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Payroll</b> | <b>Percent Increase</b> |
|-------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| 2007-08     | \$ 34,800,540  |                         |
| 2008-09     | \$ 51,548,557  | 48%                     |
| 2009-10     | \$ 60,958,732  | 18%                     |
| 2010-11     | \$ 62,502,857  | 3%                      |
| 2011-12     | \$ 69,490,000  | 11%                     |

Source: All payroll numbers are from the USA Today summary of season-by-season NHL Salaries By Team; each season's payroll numbers can be found by selecting the desired season from the drop-down menu at the top of the page. They are cited in the as "NHL Salaries By Team".